

Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

No. 2 - 2017

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- Site** | <http://messengersfromthestars.lettras.ulisboa.pt/journal/>
- Contact** | mfts.journal@gmail.com
- ISSN** | 2183-7465
- Editor** | Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa |
University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies
Alameda da Universidade - Faculdade de Letras
1600-214 Lisboa - Portugal



INTERVIEW





Fig. 6 - Cat. N. 113.4.78 (Star archetypal creator - candle light model 2.0.3.)

Interview with | Ken MacLeod

Interviewers | Ana Rita Martins & Igor Furão



About the Author | Ken MacLeod was born in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Scotland and lives in West Lothian. He has Honours and Masters degrees in biological subjects and worked for some years in the IT industry. Since 1997 he has been a full-time writer. He is the author of sixteen science fiction novels, from *The Star Fraction* (1995) to *The Corporation Wars: Insurgence* (Orbit, December 2016), and many articles and short stories. His work has been translated into many languages including German, Turkish, Spanish, Polish and Japanese. His novels and stories have received three BSFA awards and three Prometheus Awards, and several have been short-listed for the Clarke and Hugo Awards.

He is currently working on a space opera trilogy, *The Corporation Wars* (forthcoming). In 2009 he was Writer in Residence at the ESRC Genomics Policy and Research Forum at Edinburgh University, and in 2013 and 2014 was Writer in Residence at the MA Creative Writing course at Edinburgh Napier University. He is on the Advisory Board of the Edinburgh Science Festival.

Ken MacLeod's blog is **The Early Days of a Better Nation**: <http://kenmacleod.blogspot.com>

From computer programmer to Science Fiction writer. Did your background in science influence you? How did you get into Science Fiction writing?

Ken MacLeod (KM) | I and my science background – I think they are related in that I was one of those children or young people who started discovering Science Fiction (SF) at an early age and essentially I read nothing, no fiction, other than SF between the ages of 12 and 20 or 21. From SF I got the idea that being a scientist was the most important and exciting thing you could do and I made a good faith effort to become a scientist, but the drawback of that was that I was not very good at mathematics. So following the least mathematical kind of science at that time was zoology, and I studied that for my degree. Then I saw a postgraduate project in biomechanics and I had the delusional idea that I could do it, because I had so many classes on mechanics and physics, and so on. It took me a long time to get a research degree, and meantime I worked in short-term jobs, as many people did in fact after graduating or while finishing their post-graduate work.

Eventually I went into programming, which was at that time – in the mid-1980s – full of failed scientists of one kind or another; they were SF readers too. In the intervening years I had written a number of SF short stories, which I had sent in to the major – in fact the only – British SF magazines. The first one was *New Worlds* and later was *Interzone*. *Interzone* sent me increasingly polite rejection letters; the last one was for a story called “Nineteen Eighty-Nine” and the best thing about that story was the title because it told you everything you needed to know about the story. (*laughs*) In other words the events of [the real-world] 1989 happened in the world of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and they – *Interzone* – suggested it to be sent to a local fanzine. So I sent it to a fanzine that was in Edinburgh and they rejected it, so my joke was that at this point I had no choice but to write a novel. By that point I started writing a novel and it was mainly to show myself and to show my friend Iain Banks that I actually could write a novel, because over the years – I have known Iain Banks since High School – I had told him about all those interesting novels I was going to write and at a certain point after Iain had written 5 or 6 novels, I learnt from a mutual friend that he was getting a bit tired of hearing about these novels I was going to write so I thought I would give it a go. I finished my MPhil thesis and was no longer attempting to be a scientist so I decided to write a book.

I started my novel *The Star Fraction* (1995), which I didn’t have a plot for; I just had a starting situation and developed from there. Needless to say the first draft

was very satisfying to me and was enthused over by Iain encouraging me... and got nowhere with anybody else because it was full of stuff that didn't make any sense unless you knew what preoccupied me. Essentially the plot was all subtext; you had to read the book twice to get any idea what it was really all about. I got to the second draft and I sent it to Iain's agent Mic Cheetham, who wrote back with a little postcard and she said basically she liked the details but could not make sense of the story. That summer I happened to be back in London again and I met Mic and she took me out to lunch, and she said, "If it was a film, what would you have on the poster?" and I said, "It's about a man who gets killed but his gun goes on fighting," and she said, "Great! Now go write that book" (*laughs*) so then I did a third draft in which I filled in much more explicitly what was going on. I seem to recall that this involved quite a lot of crawling about in my carpet with cut up sheets of paper and notes (*laughs*) because at that time I did not have a very advanced word processor – I think that was actually one that Iain gave me after he had upgraded to a better computer. I was very grateful to Iain and when I sold my first book I was able to buy my own first computer.

Anyway Mic took that to an editor John Jarrold who is well known in British SF circles. He was a long-standing fan who had worked for many years as a librarian and then got a job with a publisher as a SF editor, which everyone was delighted with because if anyone deserved success, it was John. He read my novel and the next thing I knew, I was offered a two-book contract. That was great until I started thinking about the second book and I knew I had 18 months to write it. (*laughs*) I thought of it as a sequel and I had my first encounter with what became a very familiar experience of writing with just a sense of utter misery and despair when you think, "Nobody is possibly going to be interested in this stuff again" I think I phoned up Mic Cheetham and moaned to her and she reassured me; she was right because I was in that kind of feeling of being stuck and nothing is happening and so on... That's when the real work is going on in the back of your brain, in your subconscious – at least that is what I tell myself (*laughs*) – and the real stroke of what really made my second novel *The Stone Canal* (1996) was that I realized that there was a minor character in my first, in *The Star Fraction*, which is set in the year 2045, who is in his 90s and it struck me that this guy was the same age as me and that meant that my experience was in there to be plundered for his and I dug out my embarrassing student-years note books and diaries, and so on, and created the back story for this guy, Jonathan Wilde.

Have you lost your faith in science? Does it have to be questioned?

KM | Yeah, it depends on what you mean by faith in science. I think science and faith are two very different things because science is about asking. Every statement is open to attack and criticism whereas with faith there are no statements that can be questioned, so there is that emotional engagement. But in terms of confidence in the scientific method obviously it is still... I have that... The social significance of science always has to be questioned and I think SF plays a part in doing that as well as popularising science and there is a very fine line in a way between defending science and technology, which is something I kind of do independently and would do if even I wasn't a SF writer, and criticising it because there is such an immense amount of ignorance, which is excusable, and misinformation, which is not, out there and it is a constant struggle.

As a Science Fiction writer, how do you perceive the role of SF as a genre capable of drawing people's attention to society's problems? *Intrusion*, for instance, seems to draw attention to a potentially oppressive government, though it is very subtle.

KM | I think SF has an obvious role in [social criticism] but the extent to which it does that is something that again is open to question because quite a lot of SF is really affirmative of the social order, I think. Sometimes even when it is being quite radical from one point-of-view, you can see it can be blind to other issues. The obvious example is as we look back to Golden Age SF we see instances of – perhaps unconscious or unwitting but certainly taken for granted – sexism. Further back you get pretty blatant racism, which you find not just in SF, but also in all popular literature of imperialist countries, and so on.

I started writing my first novels for what would later be *The Fall Revolution* books (1995-1999) where I tried to get my head around, look at and interrogate from different angles if you like the fall of socialism in Europe, the fall of the Left in the West and the disintegration of the Left. I did that in a form of partly satirical exaggeration and partly by pushing certain – what seemed to be quite fruitful – metaphors or possible honest potential insights like part of the hidden [agenda of the book] – it is not hidden, actually, it is quite overt when you see it. In *The Star Fraction*, my first novel, there is a suggestion that there is some similarity between the problems of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the problems of centralised planning

and that came out of a TV program on planning [probably “The Engineers’ Plot”, Adam Curtis, BBC 1992], which showed the actual offices in the Soviet Union of Gosplan, the planning ministry, and there were people explaining how it had all worked. Basically there was a big office building and lots and lots of paper flows into it and lots and lots of paper flows out from it and the people working in this ministry, they knew that not all or in fact the great majority of the information coming in to them was unreliable and the great majority of the information sent out by them was not going to be acted on, or at least a significant part. The thing is they did not know which part so they were radically ignorant about what was going on and this reminded me so much of the classic John Searle thought-experiment of the Chinese room where he tries to establish, perhaps not quite the impossibility of strong AI, but an idea that there is some incoherence in the idea of a conscious AI by imagining a room where somebody who is unable to understand or speak Chinese but has all these dictionaries of Chinese language and grammars and so on, and people are shoving questions under the door written in Chinese and the person in the room is able to – by symbolic manipulation – figure out an answer and shove it out. I think this still is one of the great philosophical thought-experiments, which is still being argued, and that sort of thing struck me as a really intriguing line of thought that somebody cleverer than me should take up. (*laughs*)

Some of your novels, like *The Night Sessions* (2008), deal with the theme of religion: different religions, faiths, but also the rejection and/or acceptance of a heavenly entity (or of God). Given the crossroads that many of your characters have to face, would you say that we are facing a faith crisis?

KM | I think everyone at a certain point – at various points in fact – has to make existential decisions and it is possible that our tools – mental tools – for making existential decisions have become very damaged in different ways. First of all, by the decline of the traditional religions, which I think science will eat in the end, any religion that makes factual claims is going to be challenged by science. So you will still have religions that are in a sense a philosophy and a way of life, like Buddhism, and so on, which are not really religions in the same sense as Christianity and Islam. But these – the monotheistic, dogmatic scripture-based religions of the book and all other theoretical progeny, like Mormonism – are in the long run doomed by science.

The other thing that has created kind of a faith crisis, or potentially could do it, is there has been a real decline in people's sense of being part of a historical process and this is kind of celebrated in postmodernism with the idea of the collapse of the grand narrative.

The end of history...

KM | Yes, as we are seeing now, it is actually quite a dangerous place to be because this vacuum or gap is being filled by all kinds of havoc, ideological extremisms.

Connected to this idea, does religion play an important role in your writing? If you think about some of Heinlein's work, like *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and in *The Night Sessions* religion is at the centre of the narrative so do you think that, unlike what is popularly held, the two – SF and religion – may have more in common? Do you try explicitly to show that link in your novels or do you just describe some aspects of political parties and let the reader figure out if there is a link or not?

KM | In the case of religion, I have a personal backstory with that as I grew up in a very fundamentalist sect of Protestantism and there was Creationism and all the rest of it so I went through a lot of intellectual, emotional struggles in my teens – a not unusual story. I have quite a bit of respect in some ways for certain aspects of that kind of strongly held belief, although I cannot share it. Likewise, I have a lot of respect for a different kind of religion, the more liberal versions that you get and the more mainstream churches, but again I cannot share it. I am always very friendly with people like, say Paul Cornell and his wife (she is a minister), who are liberal Christians, and Francis Spufford, another good example of a very broadminded and liberal and yet very – in many ways – very orthodox Christian and I can see where these people are coming from and I literally have no quarrel with them. What I do have a quarrel with is with the people who trample all over science or over secular ethics. The ethics – what in other European languages are called profane or mundane – I think that all our politics have to be profane, mundane, because otherwise there is only room for irreconcilable conflicts. So you have to justify things in terms that are in principle open to anybody to agree or disagree with rather than a special revelation to one person or to one church or religion.

Actually in my first novel (*The Star Fraction*, 1995) there is a guy growing up in a fundamentalist community, which I had great fun describing; there is *The Night*

Sessions and there are one or two short stories, like “A Case of Consilience”, which is a riff on James Blish’s classic novel *A Case of Conscience* (1958) about a missionary on an alien world, and another story with the provocative title “Jesus Christ, Reanimator” (2007), which imagines Jesus actually physically coming back out of the sky and what a puzzle he would be, because he comes out of the sky above Megiddo, Israel, and is escorted back down by jets. (*laughs*)

That is actually, strangely enough, the story I have written that is most respectful of religion and of Jesus, but in the case of *The Night Sessions* it came out of a moment of inspiration when I happened to see on television a U2 video – the one where they are standing at an airport and an airliner comes in above them – and I remarked to my wife that they looked like Free Church [of Scotland] elders, the band with their black hats and their long black coats and then I thought “ah-ah” – you think of airports and terrorism and “ah, Presbyterian terrorists!” – How would that come about? (*laughs*) Within a few minutes I had a lot to think about and that is where the story came from. Of course, I had grown up with these tales of Presbyterian martyrs in Scotland so I had quite a bit of background to draw on.

Scotland also plays a role in your novels. To what extent does your Scottish background help shape the themes and motifs that you approach in your writing?

KM | Almost all the places referred to in my novels that are set on Earth are real places where I have been, whether that is New Zealand or London or Scotland and some of the parts of Scotland described are ones I am very familiar with. I take this to quite ridiculous lengths like there is a house in *Intrusion*, which is the actual house where I grew up in when I was a child.

In my novella *The Human Front* (2001), the character also starts in that same village and it is a kind of inversion of my own past, my father was a minister, not a doctor, and so on. Obviously the [industrial town of] Greenock he goes to when he is 10 is kind of like the Greenock I went to when I was 10, but it is a somewhat different history, but the feeling of noise, of strong air pollution, the shock of finding people who are not physically healthy was something that was very real to me, because when I was growing up on the island [of Lewis], lots of people were not exactly poor, but they were not necessarily well-off so we had large families and children who were always wearing ill-fitting clothes that were passed down from older siblings, but

everyone was well-fed. Even as late as 1965 in as a rich a country as Britain you could come to an industrial town and find older generations of people who had had rickets in childhood.

To finish, we have a very cliché question for your Portuguese fans, but since your work is not translated into Portuguese, is there any chance your books will be translated in the near future?

KM | I don't know, that is entirely up to Portuguese publishers. I would love for it to happen, obviously, but I don't know... I just want to wind back very quickly to revisit the question about places and Scottish landscapes, which are very, very important to me and I do put them in. I am not politically a nationalist but that does not mean I do not love the place...

What is there not to love? In your books you have this feeling that culturally there is something that links that SF to Scotland. There is a physicality, which I do not find in many SF novels so I enjoy that aspect of your books.

KM | I can send you links to a couple of articles¹ I wrote specifically about these aspects of Scottish literature.

That would be great. Thank you for taking the time to grant us this interview.

¹ See: MacLeod, Ken. "The Future Will Happen Here Too." *The Bottle Imp*. Issue 8, 2010. <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue8/MacLeod.pdf>
---. "As if You Lived in the Near Future of an Undecided Nation." *The Bottle Imp*. Issue 18, 2015. <http://asls.arts.gla.ac.uk/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue18/MacLeod.pdf>