

John Plotz: So, if you had to choose Hammett and Gertrude Stein, you would take?

Samuel Delany: Oh Gertrude Stein.

John Plotz: Gertrude Stein, yeah. That's what I thought.

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to 'Recall This Book'. A podcast that looks backwards to see into the future. And, never farther into the future than today when I speak with Samuel Delany, the brilliant and celebrated science-fiction and fantasy writer. Probably he is best known for mind-bending novels like '*Dhalgren*' and gender-bending ones like '*Trouble on Triton*'. If I told you everything I respect and admire about his science-fiction, going back to his first novel '*The Jewels of Aptor*' in 1962, and everything I love about his '*Nevèrjon*' fantasy stories, we would never get to hear the man himself. So, let's get right into the conversation he and I had at the Newhouse Center for the Humanities at Wellesley in February 2019 just before he gave a talk there about afrofuturism. Chip and I, he goes by Chip face to face, were sitting in my office along with his friend, Bill and the conversation turned to the question of how you distinguish science-fiction from other genres.

John Plotz: Can I ask about, you use the word '*paraliterary*' a lot. Is that specific to science-fiction is that a-

Samuel Delany: Well, the paraliterary genres were the genres specifically that if in the middle of the century you asked the man on the street, *le homme moyen sensuel*, you know.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: Um, who would say, well that's not literature. And so it was you know, science-fictions, westerns, mysteries, comic books, pornography, you know. Now I think that any of those can rise to very high art. I think all, the very fact that it is a separate genre means that it has its own way of becoming, you know, there are people who can do something with it and then there are people who don't do very much with it. But, I think there are people who do. And there are the great workers in the comic book, in comics like Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, who have gone on to do other things as well.

John Plotz: But the point of the classification would be that even if someone becomes great in that field it's not like they earned the title 'literary'. Like a great science-fiction writer does not become a literary writer they remain paraliterary.

Samuel Delany: Yeah. Although, I think there are some writers who do, one of the ones I am going to be talking about later this afternoon, Theodore Sturgeon. Who I think is just one of the great writers of the middle 20th century and who is uh, just, his collected stories is one of the best portraits of the world—from the middle of the 20's, middle 50's through to the end of the century—that we have. And

some of it was science-fiction, some of it was very borderline science-fiction but it's a great, that's great art.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: And I would much prefer to see that in a Library of America edition than some of the stuff of—a woman who I like very personally, very much but I didn't think was anywhere near as interesting a writer--Ursula Gwynn.

John Plotz: Yeah. If I remember you also have a boundary, you also don't think we should go back beyond Gernsback and scientiffiction to look for earlier, like H. G. Wells or-

Samuel Delany: Well it's not science-fiction, you could call it proto-science fiction if you want but I think-

John Plotz: And didn't Wells call it scientific romance?

Samuel Delany: Um, yeah, I mean. I don't think you need to go back, I mean there's a reason why the term 'science-fiction' gelled at that certain point at about 1922.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: You know, there's one occurrence of the word 'science-fiction' in a book from 1851 but when you read *A Little Earnest Book About a Great Old Subject*, that's a, I think that's an 1851 or 1849. And-

John Plotz: Uh-huh.

Samuel Delany: But even there, it clearly doesn't mean what Gernsback meant. Or what Gernsback's fans who named it science-fiction, he used scientifiction.

John Plotz: scientifiction.

Samuel Delany: Scientifiction. Which was just too clumsy to say. The fans and their letter columns turned it into science-fiction.

John Plotz: But so you think that makes *Frankenstein* not science-fiction?

Samuel Delany: No.

John Plotz: Makes *the Time Machine* not science-fiction.

Samuel Delany: I think, with all due respect, I think that's a crock of shit. If I may use a-

John Plotz: Yep. We don't have to beep.

Samuel Delany: No, I don't think that- they're gothic novels.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: And the gothic novels are a perfectly good and reasonable genre.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: You know, and there's no point in snatching it out of one genre.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: It's just an attempt to give it, to make it- the gothic novel has enough problems maintaining its own dignity.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: [inaudible]

John Plotz: How do you feel about the different labels applied to your own writing? Do you feel like you have books that get lumped into one category that you really think belong in another category, or....?

Samuel Delany: Hm. If anybody would read them at all I'm very pleased. I mean the Nevèryon books, I think are basically swords and sorcery.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: You know, or whatever you wanna call them. I don't think they are science-fiction, I think they're-

John Plotz: Do people treat them as allegorical? Do people take them as really being about New York during the 80's or do people take them-

Samuel Delany: Well some of them *are* about New York in the 80's like um, *the Tales of Plagues and Carnivals*. Which was written before we stopped referring to AIDS as a plague.

John Plotz: Right yeah.

Samuel Delany: So yeah.

John Plotz: I was actually wondering about the role that poetry plays in your writing. I really like those little verses, I don't know if you call them poems. The verses inside Nevèryon, like the verse that people play with the balls, I went out to Babara's Pit...

Samuel Delany: *I went out to Babara's pit*

John Plotz: yeah.

Samuel Delany: *At the crescent's moon's first dawning*  
*But the Thanes of Garth had covered it.*

John Plotz: You got it yeah.

Samuel Delany: And no one found a place to sit.

Together: *And Bellam's key no longer fit*

Samuel Delany: Yeah.

John Plotz: So, do you think, is poetry important to you or?

Samuel Delany: Yeah, I think Folk poetry is always interesting. And that's just an attempt to use it.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: And I like poetry and I read a lot of poetry and I've read a lot of poetry and there have been periods where I thought we had, we had... I was on the staff of a poetry magazine for many years called the '*Little Magazine*', it was run by David Hartwell who at a certain point decided to give it up and turn it into the same editorial. It became, (what is it?) *The New York Review of Science fiction*.

John Plotz: Oh yeah?

Samuel Delany: At which it survived for another few years until-

John Plotz: Uh huh.

Samuel Delany: And still was going on as the *New York Review of Science fiction*.

John Plotz: (Knock) Come in.

John Plotz: So, we never did get back to finish that discussion about poetry that knock was Delany getting summoned to speak to a Wellesley class about Writing AIDS. Uh, and then unfortunately, right when we got started again, about 90 minutes later we had returned to talking about one of my own favorite writers I had just turned on a ridiculously noisy coffee machine.

Samuel Delany: What stories are you talking about?

Bill: The infamous Philip K. Dick.

John Plotz: Is he infamous in your opinion?

Samuel Delany: I was never a Philip K Dick fan. I like his non science-fiction very much.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: I like his Memoirs of 'A Crap Artist', 'Mary and the Giant', I edited 'Mary and the Giant'.

John Plotz: Oh, no kidding!

Samuel Delany: Yes.

John Plotz: Have you ever read that early one '*In Milton Lumky Territory*'?

Samuel Delany: Uh no.

John Plotz: About the typewriter salesman?

Samuel Delany: No, I haven't.

John Plotz: I like that one. Yeah.

Samuel Delany: But uh, the science fiction never got to me.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: I don't I've ever finished '*The Man in the High Castle*'.

John Plotz: Yeah. And '*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*', you're not a fan of that one?

Samuel Delany: Um, I like the movie, I like Blade Runner.

Samuel Delany: Thank you.

John Plotz: Sure, and there's sugar behind you if you want. Yeah.

John Plotz: I like the book better than the movie but I know I'm basically alone in that, most everyone loves the movie more.

Samuel Delany: Well I don't think I've ever read the book all the way through.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: Again, as I said, I was never a Phillip K Dick fan but I don't know why.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: It just seemed very pedestrian.

Bill: Well I mean you care about the language.

Samuel Delany: Uh huh.

Bill: And I would say, he's like

John Plotz: Yes. Yes.

Samuel Delany: His politics are fascinating. I mean-

John Plotz: They are fascinating.

Samuel Delany: That's, that's what's good. He has a sense of the ordinary guy that I think is great. But that's for me, that's the high point of well... uh.

John Plotz: You know, I have a friend who just wrote an article about him and it turns out he was very pro-life, did you know that?

Samuel Delany: I'm not surprised.

John Plotz: Furious about abortion rights, do you want milk or sugar?

Samuel Delany: Yeah, I do know that he got into a big argument with Joanna Russ, who was one of my favorite writers.

John Plotz: I love her.

Samuel Delany: Yeah....

John Plotz: But so Chip, something that you were saying reminded me of something you said about the sentence: that the sentence is the most important unit of writing for you.

Samuel Delany: Yeah, for me, yeah.

John Plotz: Um.

Samuel Delany: And I think, I do go along with Stein, the paragraph is the emotional unit of the English language.

John Plotz: Right, yeah.

John Plotz: But you also have, it's also a point about the sentence instead of the word. I think, like the part I was reading was apropos of your skepticism about the idea of the *logos*.

Samuel Delany: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

John Plotz: Is that how you think of your own writing, do you think of it as sentence, sentence making?

Samuel Delany: Basically, yeah.

John Plotz: And is that different for science-fiction versus fantasy, versus other kinds of-

Samuel Delany: No, I don't think that's where the difference lies, I think all writing requires that. But I think there are, science fiction allows some combination of words. Science-fiction is a genre that is distinguished because certain things can happen in the language of science fiction that don't happen in any place else.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: Um, science fiction tends to put, make, take the literal meaning, if it has a choice between a figurative meaning and a literal meaning, the literal meaning is always open. *Her world exploded*. You know, it's not an emotionally fuzzy metaphor, it can literally mean a planet belonging to a woman blew up.

John Plotz: Right.

Samuel Delany: As in, Princess uh...

John Plotz: Yeah. Princess Leia or-

Samuel Delany: *Her world exploded*.

John Plotz: Yeah, I see. So science-fiction is actualization of the-

Samuel Delany: Yes. Yeah. Or you know, *he turned on his left side*, which is insomniac tossing yeah, you can turn on the switch on your sinistral flank. And there are all these, '*the door dilated*'.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: Which is a line from a Heinlein novel, which knocked Ellison's socks off because it meant that the door had literally dilated. You know, there was an iris aperture thing.

John Plotz: Yeah, you know in *Star Trek*, they always make that joke, whenever they like find a 20th century spaceship they'll always walk up to the door and say 'Oh the

door is broken' and then someone has to go and like- *oh the door is broken*  
[laughter] , *this door is not dilating.*

John Plotz: But you know, I was thinking of another connection when I was reading that um, Chip, which is like, in the *Nevèryon* books, you're also. It seems like one of the things you are talking about in *Nevèryon* is that the, that language is a powerful force also.

Samuel Delany: Yes. Mm-hmm (affirmative)

John Plotz: The image of language. Like if you write peoples' names down you can control them.

Samuel Delany: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. I think that's always been you know. That's well, in *Nevèryon* for instance, the God's are those who cannot be named. They have a whole series of nameless Gods. It's not just one nameless God, they're all really important Gods who just don't name.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: One of the things that *Nevèryon*, I don't know, have you read the entire sequence?

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: Oh you have? Okay well you know, capitalism doesn't get invented until money gets invented.

John Plotz: Well I was sort of wondering whether writing was the moment capitalism gets invented or-

Samuel Delany: Yeah. Well you know, and it follows the Levi-Strauss thing, what is writing used for? To keep track of the work of slaves. You know?

John Plotz: Right, yeah. Right.

Samuel Delany: What's the basic use of writing? To make sure you know what the slaves are producing.

John Plotz: Yeah, so I was reading how important Levi-Strauss was to you, it sounds like you were reading Levi Strauss the same moment that-

Samuel Delany: I was reading Levi-Strauss before I- I started reading Levi-Strauss when people first started reading him, yeah.

John Plotz: Like in the mid-60's?



Samuel Delany: Yeah. Right.

John Plotz: So, before a lot of the post-structuralist stuff had been translated into English that Levi-Strauss comes before...

Samuel Delany: Yeah, well he was the first to translate.

John Plotz: So, I had a big open-ended question, and I kept trying to get a less open-ended way of asking it. But basically, I was wondering about: the ways that people think about the categories of race and sexuality and gender have changed a lot in the decades you've been writing.

Samuel Delany: Yeah.

John Plotz: Are you aware of those changes: do they make a difference for you in your writing or?

Samuel Delany: Well yeah, they certainly make a big difference about the way I live.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: I mean, I've been, Stonewall didn't happen until I was 27 years old. When I was-

John Plotz: You'd been a published writer for like 7 years by then or 8 years.

Samuel Delany: Yeah, and I was one of the first people to come out in science fiction even before Stonewall. And those were the ones that got me the prizes. Things like 'Aye, and Gomorrah' and 'Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones', those are the ones that got the Nebula Awards. I've often said that if gay people didn't exist, straight people would have had to invent them.

John Plotz: But then also-

Samuel Delany: Because, the science-fiction writers in America was not a gay-friendly organization. Boy was it not, I mean it was not sensitive at all. Some of the things that went on in the newsletter were enough to curl your toes, but, at the same time the things that when you wrote about something like that people liked to hear them and those are the ones that got the prizes.

John Plotz: Were you more aware of it issues around being gay or was race or sexuality in the science-fiction world were they both things that were threatening for you? I know you've written about moments where you felt like put on the spot because....

John Plotz: The article I had in mind is called 'Racism and Science-Fiction' and it appeared in 1998 but it's about a moment in 1968 when at an awards banquet, the young Delany won two Nebula awards, which is kind of like winning two National Book

awards in different categories. As he walks by Isaac Asimov's chair, Asimov said in a stage whisper 'You know Chip, we only voted you those awards because you're negro'.

John Plotz: Asimov you mentioned- [crosstalk 00:17:02]

Samuel Delany: He was making a joke, he was making a joke when I- he was making a joke. But it was a reminder- I took it like as a reminder, *nobody's gonna ever forget it. Here we are giving you your second prize of the evening, but you are black.*

John Plotz: And here we are in 2018 and 2019 and NK Jemisin is writing about the same thing. Just basically like she's guilty of winning a prize while black.

Samuel Delany: Yes right, exactly yeah.

John Plotz: It clearly didn't deter you, but it must've shaped?

Samuel Delany: I do not know.

John Plotz: I was also thinking--when you're talking about you know, the gay unfriendliness of the world--I was also thinking novels like 'Triton', you're also talking about trans-identity too. You're talking about all kinds of gender categories.

Samuel Delany: Sure yeah. One of the things I may, I hope I get a chance to talk about, I'm basically going to be talking- largely going to be talking, Theodore Sturgeon's '*More Than Human*'. His first novel is the novel of transgender revenge. It's really quite amazing.

John Plotz: What novel is that?

Samuel Delany: It's called '*The Dreaming Jewels*' or it was called '*Synthetic Man*' and it's really an amazing little novel and it's about a young man who runs off to the circus and lives as a girl. And has some strange powers, which are presented pretty believably. But it allows him- his concern about gender and things like that is not the same as everybody else's.

John Plotz: Do you think then- it sounds like, I was sort of thinking you might say it's an easier world now for people who are wanting to explore, be experimental but you wouldn't say that.

Samuel Delany: I think that, at the time, this was a book that written pre-Christine Jorgensen, but, it was-

John Plotz: Yeah, I think about things like Robert Heinlein's 'By His Bootstraps' which is you know, not the friendliest.

Samuel Delany: Or 'Friday' or '*I Will Fear No Evil*', you know where he carries a woman's consciousness inside his own body and things like that.

John Plotz: Yeah, I should look back at that again actually.

Samuel Delany: The problem is that those later [Heinlein] novels are unreadable, they really are. But nevertheless, what they're about are still interesting. And certainly '*Triton*' was an attempt to write some of those things sideways.

John Plotz: Do you think it was received that way, cause I read it now and just think it's an amazing book. I think it's a totally-

Samuel Delany: Thank you.

John Plotz: And um, you're welcome. I really value it, I love teaching it. But do you think they got what was going on?

Samuel Delany: I think some of them did. A friend of mine, a transgender woman said that she, '*Triton*' made her put off her transitioning for several years because she wanted to really question whether she really wanted to-

John Plotz: Interesting. Wow.

Samuel Delany: But then when she decided she really knew what she was doing.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: And so she said, *I thank you for that*. So that was very nice, yeah.

John Plotz: It just made me think about what I love about your books about how complicated your writing is. And that sort of made me wonder, you know, all of the, lovely meta-referential games that you're playing with Steiner and the different characters inside '*Nevèryon*'. Do you think of what you're doing as writing fiction that happens to have some criticism in it or is it, you're writing theory in the form of a novel or?

Samuel Delany: That's a good question, I think, I usually have an argument that I want to- although, I want it to be an open-ended argument. Like, '*Trouble on Triton*' for instance, um, basically the question is, *is this guy nuts?* Or is he hopeless or is there hope? And I think, I have my opinion but you have to get to the last sentence of the book to figure out what my opinion is. You know, I think he's nuts.

John Plotz: I was sort of surprised by that actually, when I got to the end.

Samuel Delany: But people have said, that he's actually pretty sympathetic, I've had guys say that he's pretty sympathetic, not at the beginning, he's just absolutely intolerable at the beginning but by the end, you realize this poor nut is nuts.

John Plotz: Can I read you one of my favorite lines from, this is inside '*Nevèryon*', not sure exactly where it is but you're describing how being in the *Nevèryon* world. You say 'Imagine going to a wonderful gallery visit-' you remember this? 'With an intelligent, witty, well-spoken and deeply cultured friend, an expert in the period, richly informed on the customs and economics of the time and a friend who you only wished as the two of you walked from painting to painting would shut up'.

John Plotz: So is that how you think about-

Samuel Delany: This was not me, this was Elizabeth Lynn.

John Plotz: Oh.

Samuel Delany: In fact, I ascribe it to Elizabeth Lynn who said this at a party. [inaudible 00:23:27] And I thought, what a great description of '*Nevèryon*' so I included it.

John Plotz: Do you take it as a compliment or?

Samuel Delany: Well not as a compliment, I think it's accurate.

Samuel Delany: Because, you said *am I a Proust fan*? Well it's kind of Proust-like, Proust is like that. At a certain point you wonder how long is this sentence gonna go on? And I have a great deal of respect for this Chandler, Hammett, tough guy, quick, you know, sense. Which I'm always aspiring towards-

John Plotz: Hemingway and the six word short story.

John Plotz: But that's not you.

Samuel Delany: No. Although, I'm always dragging it behind me.

John Plotz: That's actually really interesting, yeah. Though you had to choose between Hammett and Gertrude Stein you would take?

Samuel Delany: Oh, Gertrude Stein.

John Plotz: Gertrude Stein, that's what I thought.

Samuel Delany: I think she's one of the great critics of the- and a great....[trails off] I used to go New Year's Eve, there was a place called the 'Paula Cooper Gallery' in New York and from before 1982 until, til the place closed down, we would go. And every

year we would alternate between reading 'Finnegans Wake' paragraph by paragraph, leading *'The Making of Americans'*.

John: Wait, which gallery was this?

Samuel Delany: The Paula Cooper Gallery.

John: Yeah, I went to that, when I was in the end of college- like 1989 or something.

Samuel Delany: There you go, if you'd come at 3 o'clock in the morning you might've seen me reading.

John: Ah, wow. Yeah the Paula Cooper Gallery. Wow.

Samuel Delany: I like to, I used to read there, basically me and Richard Castellanos would get together and I think, over the 15 years I did that,

John Plotz: Yeah.

Samuel Delany: I must've read all of 'Finnegans Wake' out loud.

Samuel Delany: Because invariably what would happen is, we would take every other paragraph, Richard and I. And invariably at 3 o'clock in the morning after the first day, the next three readers wouldn't show up. And we just go on reading.

John Plotz: We gotta get one of those in Boston. Yeah, we need that.

John Plotz: Well, Chip thanks a lot and on behalf of the podcast too. Thanks a lot.

Samuel Delany: Well thank you. This was fun.

John Plotz: Yeah, this was really fun.

John Plotz: Recall This Book is the brain-child of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry and is affiliated with Public Books and today was recorded at the Newhouse Center for the Humanities at Wellesley College. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, 'Fly Away'. You may be interested in checking out our recent interview with Madeleine Miller, author of 'Circe' and my conversation with the comic novelist, Stephen McCauley. Upcoming episodes also include a conversation with the poet David Ferry. Finally, thanks so much for listening and if you enjoyed today's show it would be incredibly helpful to us, if you took a minute to write a review or just rate us on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.