

Recall This Book

Books in Dark Times

Kim Stanley Robinson, April 2020

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to *Recall This Book*, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems and events. So I'm John Plotz and our RTB virtual guests today is the world-renowned Sci-Fi novelist Kim Stanley Robinson. His trilogies include *the Three Californias*, *Science in the Capitol* and very deeply beloved in my household, the *Mars Trilogy*, which is Red, Green, and Blue, for those scoring at home. He has won way too many Locus, Hugo Nebula and other awards for me to list here. And he has an asteroid named after him, which I'm in my science fiction class, we use as a, as a test of something. In an earlier life he was a PhD, student of Frederick Jameson and he wrote his dissertation on the novels of Philip K Dick. He's been a Californian since childhood. Though he did I just discovered live in Boston long enough to get a degree from Boston University. Where are you living? Stan. Were you living in Boston at the time? Oh, great. So, if that's, if, if you were living near BU, that's probably about three miles from where I am perched right now.

Kim Stanley Robinson:

Well, I was in Boston last month and I walked down to my, the apartment I lived in in 1974 75, which was in Allston. So it was West of BU and it was a great year.

John Plotz:

Oh, that's great. Yeah. that's, that's on my regular bike ride to, to Widener. I, I love that neighborhood. So, so Stan, thank you so much for doing this. It's a great pleasure.

KSR:

Well, it's my pleasure.

John Plotz:

So this is the latest installment of our Books in Dark Times series, which as you probably know by now, asks what books we turn to for guidance, sustenance or encouragement at dark moments like these, you know, what books have you been turning to for comfort or joy over these last few weeks?

KSR:

Weirdly, I was in the Grand Canyon on a rafting trip between March 11th and March 19th.

John Plotz:

Wow.

KSR:

And so when I came out on March 19, things were spectacularly different than when I went in. And we were out of contact. So to tell you the truth, since March 19th, I've been in catch up mode. I've had a hard time understanding, believing and my personal life is very similar to what I lived before. I write at home, I garden, I, I exercise, it's not my social life of course is, has gone as anyone else's or it's been put online, but my, my life was already kind of a shelter in place type life.

John Plotz:

So that Grand Canyon interlude sounds amazing. I mean, that sounds like something out of a ended a last man novel. It's like purple cloud. Yeah.

KSR:

Or George Stewart *Earth Abides*. I'm, I'm writing an introduction for *Earth Abides* and I think that's what happens to the main, the protagonist is he comes back from a trip into the wilderness and everybody's gone. It's not quite, it's, you know, it's not really like that now. It's more interesting in so

many ways. I'm a little less apocalyptic. Yeah. But it's, there are similarities enough that when I came out, I had many requests for commentary and I realized that people now think of us as being in a science fiction novel or they think science fiction is now the genre that is the best realism of our time. And I've been saying that for many years. So it was interesting to see that now being felt by other people as well.

John Plotz:

Can you play that thought out a bit more? Like, do you think that the thing that you've been saying about science fiction is the realism of our times. Do you think that when people come to you for comment, did they, do, do you think they're thinking about it the same way that you are or are they just, is it just, they hear the word COVID and they reach for dystopia?

KSR:

Well, there's that. There's also a notion that I don't think is right and I don't agree with, that science fiction is about predicting the future and since predicting the future is impossible, that would be a high bar for science fiction to have to get over. And it would always be, always be failing. And in that sense it always is failing, but it's more of a modeling exercise or a way of thinking. And so what I've been saying for a long time is we're in a science fiction novel now that we are all co-writing together. So we're all science fiction writers and, and it's a mental habit that everybody has that has nothing to do with the genre, but it has to do with planning and decision making and how people feel about their life projects.

So you have hopes and then you plan to get to your hopes by doing things in the present. Well, that's utopian thinking. You have middle of the night fears that everything is falling apart, that it's not going to work. And that's dystopian thinking. And so there's nothing special going on in science fiction thinking. It's something that we're all doing all the time. And world civilization right now is teetering on the brink of it could go well, but it also could go badly. And that's a felt reality for everybody. So in that sense, I think this is what I've been saying, that science fiction is the realism of our time.

So you want to write a novel about what it feels right now here in April of 2020 thinking, *okay, I have to write about what this, it feels like right now*. Well

you can't avoid including the planet. It's not just going to be an individual wandering around with their consciousness of themselves, which for in modernism, novels were often like that. But then there's the individual and the society and then there's the society and the planet. And these are very much science fictional relationships.

John Plotz

Can I ask, cause this is something I think about a lot, when you think of those as science fictional relationships, where do you place other speculative genres like say fantasy or horror? Do they sit alongside science fiction for that or are they subsets in, in your, in your understanding of science fiction?

KSR:

No, it's more a clustering. John Clute who wrote the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and a big part of the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. He has a good, good term that he's taken from Polish: *Fantastika* spelled with a K at the end. So *fantastika* is any non-domestic realist genre. So you've got horror, fantasy science fiction, the occult, alternative histories, whatever else might fit in is *Fantastika*. And I am interested in science fiction and I would say for myself in terms of definitions that science fiction has set in the future and it has a historical relationship that can be traced back to the present moment. And so what's interesting for me in terms of that definitional power that cut you can make is that fantasy doesn't have that history. It's not set in the future. It doesn't run back to our present in a causal chain. So now the moment I say that, you can then begin to bring up fantasies that take place, you know, where Coleridge runs into ghosts or whatever. But as a first cut, I think it's a useful definition. But definitions are always a little, you know, troublesome.

John Plotz

So, something that was putatively science fiction then, but set off in a different, in an alternate universe wouldn't be science fiction for you? It'd be more fantasy. Like in other words, if it, now, I'm trying to think of the perfect example here. I guess *Star Wars* comes to mind, but you know, something, in other words, the important thing for you is the point of departure from our own present to make it science fiction.

KSR:

Well, that I know when you point it out that makes it clear that this is just one type of science fiction, one sub-genre within the larger genre. Space opera where you're zipping about the galaxy and the laws and galaxy, some galaxy and the laws of physics are much relaxed. Well you, there was a talk of science fantasy to this Jack Vance or Gene Wolfe's work where essentially you sent a text so far in the future, like 5 million years in the future or a billion years in the future. Well, anything could be happening then. So it feels like fantasy, but you have this cover story that is supposedly science fictional.

John Plotz:

It sounds as if you're saying you've got a kind of an ethos, a way of reading that really wasn't affected by this crazy pandemic moment that we are experiencing. Do you, do you have any thoughts about why that might be? Like, do you think that's true? Is that, is that something, does that say something about you temperamentally or, yeah.

KSR:

Yeah. I've worked out my own reading habits and because I, that was a student for so long, got a PhD in literature and have been involved in various kinds of teaching or selection committees or award committees. I don't like to read anything that people tell me to read. I make my own schedule of reading and I follow, I go to the used book sales at my local library and I pick randomly and I read randomly and enjoy the feeling of randomness. So within that I have my loves and I go back to them and try to be comprehensive because I enjoy it. I enjoy getting to know those writers as writers and also for research from my own science fiction novels, I have to read a lot of nonfiction. And it's interesting, but only in the sense of the strip-mining texts for information and being fast at it.

Like I would like to be able to touch a book on the spine and immediately know everything in it.

John Plotz:

Download it.

KSR:

Yeah. When it comes to nonfiction. And I've got pretty good at looking at tables of contents and many a nonfiction book should only have been an essay in the first place. It's been, it's been padded. Yeah. And so I'm good at finding what I need in nonfiction and being very instrumental about that. Well, that kind of burns any feeling of obligation to learn more about the current world. I've got an influx of periodicals like Science News or London Review of Books and so I have contemporary reading that is very instrumental. And then I have my own literature track.

John Plotz

Does that track include, I know you, you put novels first and foremost, but I was wondering about other genres, like I mean slow readings, say poetry or philosophy or I don't know, other genres that you would want?

KSR:

Yes. I read poetry with great pleasure, usually a poem or two at night in collections by single authors before I go to sleep. And then I'll go through a book and that will often be a career, a poet's career, and it might take up to a year. And I, I love that. I also read a little bit of short stories. I read plays in print because it's hard to get to many plays and I read a fair bit of literary criticism and history just for the interest of it. So yeah, it's more in the novels, but the novel are kind of at the heart of the project as a reader. But I read at the same pace at all times in all places. I can't hurry, I can't slow down. It's not a fast pace, it's just my pace. And I, I love reading in the way that it puts you under like a hypnotist puts you under.

It's that willing suspension of disbelief that I don't, I don't read critically. I don't read as a writer trying to figure out how they did it. That might come later, but mainly I'm under. And that in that sense I'm kind of out of conscious control. I only read at the pace that my mind can take it in.

John Plotz:

And so you don't understand science fiction as outside of the realist tradition then. You think of the science fiction that you're doing as a continuation of that sort of realism?

KSR:

Yeah. Well, well, there are many things going on there. Say that maybe science fiction is a kind of a proleptic realism. In other words, you're trying to cast realism off into the future, which is a weird, a weird thing to try and say to someone. Well, this is a story of what's happens on the moons of Jupiter in the year 3000. Well, immediately, that sounds like a fantasy and it sounds like it's going to be a romance at best. Something like a dream. Well if you love novels, that's not good enough. You want a sense of this is the way life is. And so to a certain extent, the kind of science fiction that I do and I'm interested in, you have to overcompensate for the weirdness of the basic conception by adding even more realistic detail too. So it doesn't look like a cardboard set, but it looks like something you can really believe in and that that helps the suspension of disbelief so that people reading a science fiction novel, they can fall into it. And then, well, well I guess Mars must really be like that. And that's how you would build the first shelter on Mars because there's so much detail there. So my books have a craziness to them that, you know, there's some risks being taken there. But it, it served my purposes, it seemed to me to solve the problems that I had set myself.

John Plotz:

So speaking of which, can I ask what you think of that, do you know that Frederick Turner epic about the terraforming of Mars?

KSR:

Yes. *Genesis*.

John Plotz:

Genesis. Exactly. What do you, what do you make, what do you think of it?

KSR:

I think it's great. It's a wonderful Epic poem and all of Turner's Epic poems that are science fictional are fantastic. There's a post-apocalyptic one called *The New World* and there's a recent one about things kind of falling apart but not quite called *Apocalypse*.

John Plotz:

I have it on my reading list. I haven't gotten to it yet.

KSR:

Yeah, they're all good. For me *Genesis* maybe the best of them, but they are all at a very high level of both poetry and narrative. Yeah. He's doing a strange thing that is his own project and I really love it because he is a wonderful poet at the level of the line. So it isn't as if he's just a novelist that is clunking out things in verse. He's a true poet. And, and so what you get is this marvelous compaction and, and flare for phrasing. Things are said beautifully in the way that poetry ought to be. It's quite an accomplishment.

John Plotz:

Do you think of it as an accomplishment that is comparable to what you're aiming at with your own, with your own *Mars Trilogy*? Or do you think of them as in different registers?

KSR:

Well, they are in different registers and I think he's more like Le Guin. What I admire in Le Guin and in Frederick Turner is an ability to compress and to find the beautiful phrase. And, you know, I would, I aspire to that. I try for that, but I see that they're very good at that. They have a very clean line. They don't perhaps need or they don't want the intensive realist details that might make something feel more substantial. They're willing to go with the power of poetry alone or with phrasing.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Yeah. So can I ask how the Suvin phrase "cognitive estrangement" fits in with the way you've just described what you think your what, what your own sort of realist science fiction does. Does that, does that resonate or..?

KSR:

Yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah. Suvin's very important theoretically. And his cognitive estrangement comes out of Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, the estrangement effect and and the Russians and Brecht. Yeah. Yeah. What'd you want to do is present to the reader a skewed vision that at first you are being told, well, this is very, very different from you. But look at it anyway. And then there's a secondary turn another turn of the screw that says, but wait, we were describing your reality all along and then you have to think, wow, my reality is really weirder than I thought it was. It's not to be taken for granted. It's historical, it's constructed. We can do it differently. So there's a lot of utopianism in the, in the estrangement effect. And what I've been saying over the last couple of years is I think science fiction works by a double action.

This is one way to talk about the estrangement effect: The, the glasses that you put on at a 3D movie, those special glasses where one lens is showing you one thing. And the other lens is showing you another thing slightly and your brain puts together a 3D view. Well, science-fiction lens is showing you a real attempt to imagine a possible future. The other lens is a metaphor for the way things are right now. It, you know, it feels like time is speeding up. I feel like a robot. The metaphors of the basic science fictional tropes are all pretty obvious. And so what you get when the two coalesced is a vision of historical time, but cast into the future. So like a trajectory or something. So this I think is one way of describing the estrangement effect.

John Plotz:

Yeah, that's an amazing analogy. I really liked that. So, so can I ask, do you, when you look back at your own novels over the years, do you see your understanding of what you're doing changing? Like, can you look at the early books and say, *Oh, I thought about it so differently then from how I think about it now?*

KSR:

Well, I do see a really big break that came with *Red Mars*. And so all of my novels before *Red Mars* there's a half dozen or so of them were operating by a

style sheet, you might say, an agreed upon understanding of how science fiction should be written. That has to do with a little bit with Heinlein's "the door dilated"-- that you don't explain things that you write as if you were in the year that it was being written and you don't go into detailed explanations or descriptions, cut exposition, let the action describe the world, blah, blah. Well, everybody did that. That became the norm. And if you went back to an earlier style, it was seen as clunky or ignorant or boring or unreadable. And so I am decided with *Red Mars*, we had this incredible mass of new information about Mars.

And I wanted that reality effect. I've described to you. And I said, I don't care about that rule anymore. I am going to talk about rocks. People say, I talk about rocks for 20 pages at a time. What they really mean is two paragraphs at a time and it feels like 20 pages. Right. And it cracks me up how the world is still caught in that older rubric of no exposition allowed or else you're blowing it. Well, I flatly disbelieve it now. And you can see in *Red Mars* that I, I cast caution to the winds and, and tried a completely different style. And so it's a controversial book. It has high positive and high negative in terms of reader response. And there's nothing I can do about that. The, the idea you can please everyone is easily lost when you pay attention. You can't please everyone. You just have to write what you want to.

John Plotz

Well Stan, thank you very much. I don't want to monopolize your time. So especially given how much you read, like I can't, I can't get in the way of your complete-ism. Or your almost, your para completism. But anyway thanks a lot. Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and usually by Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. So we always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, suggestions for future episodes or we are very happy to hear via the hashtag "books in dark times" the books that you're reading now. You can also email us or directly or contact us via social media. And finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. You might be interested in other "Books in Dark Times" conversations as well as our conversations with such writers as Zadie Smith, Cixin Liu and Samuel Delany. Thank you so much, Stan. I really appreciate it.

KSR:

My pleasure, John.

John Plotz:

Thanks to you all for listening.