

AN EVENING WITH WILLIAM GIBSON

C. S. Samulski

Downtown LA is hot despite a rare overcast day. That makes The Last Bookstore even hotter with its lack of serious air conditioning—a non-necessity for most typical LA evenings. The store is located on street level in one expansive corner of a building old enough to retain an Art Deco longing to it. In the windows, vinyl records fill the spaces between the lattice, and inside the smell of old books beckons and welcomes you like an old lover. The ceilings, covered in intricate geometric patterns, bring back a near instant nostalgia for Blade Runner (which was of course partially filmed in these same Art Deco spaces around LA). On one wall, something like a giant eye, or perhaps a Möbius strip, near fifty feet in diameter, constructed entirely out of derelict paperbacks, stares down on all of us. It is the kind of place one expects to find William Gibson on an average Wednesday evening.

Gibson appears like a revenant, slipping in silently, but his height and gangly nature are not easily hidden even behind the high shelves here. A long sleeve navy shirt and dark pants. Something denim and one step above chucks, with what looks like after-market laces, all fresh and clean, and striped socks that he happily shows off for the duration of the chat, sitting cross-legged and seeming very comfortable in the red leather chairs. Close cropped hair on a slightly bald head. Tiny eyes behind glasses that would not quite belong on John Lennon but come close. The man in the flesh. The discomfort of the heat is washed away in the newly electrified atmosphere of his presence. One can feel everyone leaning slightly out of their chairs, waiting.

If one was to create some kind of museum for major moments in the history of SF publication, the release of *Neuromancer*, Gibson's first novel, would have to be on it for several reasons. *Neuromancer*, though not the first in its cyberpunk milieu, is largely credited with popularizing its aesthetic both within SF and eventually the broader pop culture. (Blade Runner probably is owed some dues here, having

been released two years prior, but whereas *Neuromancer* was successful from its outset, *Blade Runner* bombed in theaters.) Not only did the book popularize cyberpunk with fans, it dazzled critics. It's rare to see a first novel take a Hugo, but it happens. Winning the Nebula and the Philip K. Dick Award for the same is a whole different echelon of amazing. That's exactly what happened in *Neuromancer's* case.

Gibson often speaks disparagingly about the start of his novel writing career, alluding to the fact he was just beginning to figure out short fiction when the request from Terry Carr at Ace came in for something novel length. Gibson says he responded monosyllabic, "Yes," at a pitch of considerable terror and apprehension. Still, if you've read his short story collection *Burning Chrome*, you can see the distinct pieces that had already begun the gestation of this first novel. As Carr must have noticed, there was already something there and looking to escape the shorter form.

Much fuss is often made over this kind of success in fiction, particularly with a new voice, and much is further romanticized. Tonight Gibson recounts, as he has elsewhere, his amusement that people continue to discuss the novel's drafting on a typewriter as though this is somehow to his hipster credit or part of the book's particular magic. The more mundane answer, that the modern word processor was not yet in existence, and that it was written just the same as any other manuscript in that era, apparently eludes many. And yet you can tell there were hints that something important was in the making.

Gibson tells us of his desperation to get in touch with Carr after submitting the MS (past the contract's deadline, uh oh ...) Of course this is in the era of pre-electronic correspondence, which gives the whole anecdote a more nightmarish overtone to our modern sensibilities, and even attempted phone calls go unanswered. After three months of terrible silence, Gibson is finally reduced to heading to a convention he hopes Carr will be at. Spotting the man coming down the escalator, Gibson approaches uncertainly.

"Did you get the book?"

“Yeah.”

“And what did you think?”

We laugh as Gibson describes the way Carr cocks his head back a bit as his eyes take on a half-lidded squint, the way Gibson’s voice imitates that of a man who knows a secret the rest of the world, even young Gibson himself, isn’t quite in on.

“It’s very interesting,” Carr says, and stalks off.

Very interesting, as it turns out, gets you a triple-crown of major SF awards and an explosively successful career that continues to thrill nearly thirty years later.

And yet.

If you love Gibson for *Neuromancer*, and the other two books that make up the Sprawl Trilogy, you might be a little disappointed with the trajectory of his fiction. His latest book he is here to promote, this time a non-fiction work called *Distrust That Particular Flavor*, expounds on this subject frankly. Gibson will be the first to tell you he has gotten ever closer to the immediate present with each new trio of books. The Bridge Trilogy was set in his imagination of the 2000s, whereas *Neuromancer* began somewhere in the 2030s. The most recent trio, starting with *Pattern Recognition*, landed straight in post-9/11 territory, maybe even predating the Bridge Trilogy’s timeline, but offering a distinctively more realist tone in a world both immediate and still defamiliarized by his unique take. Gibson has taken us from hacker cowboys and self-aware AIs and street samurais to fashion consultants and prescription addicts and the fascism of Homeland Security.

This is a very Ballardian move and J. G. Ballard, who is brought up as a strong influence and inspiration, continues to appear during tonight’s conversation with a frequency that does not augur well if you want a return to futuristic Gibson. But the future and Gibson, it seems, have been wrestling with each other for some time. He even goes so far as to describe this trouble in one essay in the new collection: That nothing is new in our hyper-fast era (it’s already old

of course) and, at the same time, that everything has changed and that *this* struggle may be “the central driving tension” of his work.

It sounds like a fair self-diagnosis. Even Gibson can be somewhat contradictory on these last three works of fiction, describing how he used science fictional devices to examine and extrapolate present-day trends. At the same time, he acknowledges that he never got very far removed from contemporary reality. Succumbing to the realization that every SF story is ultimately about the time in which it’s written, Gibson sought to head off the imminent patina that accompanies any unrealized future, and therefore all science fiction, by encroaching on the present instead. Like I said, Ballardian.

It’s clear then that there is also a certain frustration with his earlier work and particularly with the assimilation of cyberpunk into the genre. He speaks candidly about his low opinion of the majority of genre fiction during that time and that he thought he and the other idealists could make it “a viable pop art” again. But cyberpunk, rather than overturning the genre, was instead successfully absorbed, he says, as if genre possessed “an unplanned capacity to protect itself.” Once a thing is named by the media and accepted by the mainstream, “your sect will inevitably fall into baroque decay.”

It’s also clear he has a fair bit of disappointment with the current offerings of SF. He describes with great despair, how he “came back to SF and realized that the people who read it referred to the entire rest of fiction as mundane.” As if, he says, glowering, one can compare Asimov and Cormac McCarthy and declare McCarthy the mundane part of the pair. He describes the state of epic fantasy in even more skewering terms as the “banal, Holliday Inn-like ruins” of Tolkien’s originality. But he dithers hopefully here, mentioning Lev Grossman’s interesting intrusion into this space, and David Mitchell’s in SF as signs of life.

Signs, he would argue, that his preferred reading list for SF still makes him an outsider.

You see, I think underneath it all, Gibson still wants to be the rebel. Still wants to be overturning tables at conventions and getting people riled up, arguing on message boards, any kind of riot really.

It's ironic his own success may be part of his failure to keep that dissatisfied fringe agitated, so one can also see his move to the present as an attempt to distance himself from what was so easily assimilated.

And yet.

Out of left field, he begins to talk about his next book, which he describes as “way future,” two futures actually, one deeply unfamiliar and one slightly more. One gets a *The City & The City* vibe from the way he details this parallel construction. He says “way future,” as in, beyond *Neuromancer's* time line. Out there. As he tilts back to look at the ceiling, humming along with us eating up every word, a very reassuring feeling falls over me. Gibson has not given up on the future at all, he has simply been refining, preparing for a new perspective. These last three books, he explains, were to stretch his “yardstick for weird,” by examining just how weird the present had gotten.

Now he's back.

“I'm really enjoying it in a different way. It's been a long time coming.” He laughs a little to himself.

There is relief at these words, as if a breath I've been holding since *Neuromancer*, is finally being exhaled. And he stares at us with half-lidded eyes, head cocked back and grinning, this time in on the secret.

C. S. Samulski is the author of *The Water Sign*. He began writing fiction at age seven and claims to have failed to complete more than one hundred novels before finishing his first, which he sold one month later to Booktrope Publishing.

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