

Q&A: David Brin on writing fiction

After obtaining a PhD in planetary physics, **David Brin** found that he could make a better living as a science-fiction novelist than a researcher. In the third in our series of five interviews with authors who each write science books for a different audience, Brin reveals that criticism — and a thick skin — are the keys to good creative writing.

Are novelists born or made?

Writing can be taken up at any point. But you need to remember that the arts are fundamentally unfair. Hard work and diligence won't necessarily take you all the way. Talent, nepotism, influence and pure luck play a huge part.

Your first novel *Sundiver* was accepted right away. Was that luck, skill or strategy?

Patience. I took 3 years to write it. I decided not to let my fantasies of artistic success drag me into anything premature. You have to love it as a hobby, develop your skill and not give a damn when it will actually happen.

Is a science background useful?

For certain subgenres, yes. But science fiction is badly named — it should have been called speculative history. Only 10% or so of science-fiction authors have any science training. But they almost all read history. Whether you are in a parallel reality or exploring the future, it is all about the implications of change on human lives. The fundamental premise of sci-fi is not spaceships and lasers — it's that children can learn from the mistakes of their parents. Tragedies such as Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* are so powerful because there's an underlying assumption that this did not have to happen. It is empowering. The great novel says 'Hey, you could prevent this.'

Many fiction writers are delving into science, such as Margaret Atwood's book about designer humans, *Oryx and Crake*. Is this a good thing?

Of course it is. More importantly, university literature departments are now less hostile towards science fiction. As sci-fi writer Theodore Sturgeon said, 90% of everything is crap. But science fiction has not been forgiven for its crap. The reason is that science fiction inherently distrusts the 'eternal verities' on which literature graduates base their doctoral dissertations. Literature departments were uncomfortable with that. But things change.



Where do you get your ideas?

I use the story as an excuse to explore science and history. My novel *The Uplift War* was inspired by the quandary in the search for extraterrestrials — if they exist, how do you prevent interstellar civilizations from rapaciously using up all the planets? It's the same debate as in sustainability and ecosystem protection. Biology is also a rich zone. In *The Giving Plague*, I pondered a benign infectious disease that makes its host want to donate blood. It sounds nice to everyone except the main character, who despises this violation of free will and vows to eradicate it.

How important is it to get the science right?

Scientists are very happy to consult with an author for the grand fee of pizza and beer. So there is no excuse for getting it terribly wrong. But you don't have to fill in all the details. You just need curiosity — and the gumption to find a local university and hunt down the advice you need, like stalking prey.

If someone wants to write fiction, where should they start?

You write and write, loving your hobby, and then circulate it. Seek the thing that all skilled craftspeople need — criticism.

If your ego is too strong to listen when people complain, that's fine, enjoy the ego, but you won't be a writer.

Where can you get feedback on your writing?

You can find a workshop group online, or through a bookstore or creative-writing class. Flattery is a poison. If someone simply likes your work, take them off your circulation list. If people are mean or simply clueless jerks, remove those guys too. What you want are readers who can say 'this scene was repetitious, this section bored me.'

When you have written something you are proud of, who should you send it to?

An editor. Fortunately, science-fiction editors are the hardest working in the industry — they actually read the first page of everything they get sent. If you have honed your literary skills so that the first page is competent, they'll finish the first chapter. If the topic and plot are gripping, they may even finish the book.

Have the Internet, blogs and self-publishing affected novelists?

More and more people feel that it is their right to seek a form of self-expression. But the more people are empowered to do art, the harder it is to do it professionally. It's already happening. Adjusted for inflation, the advance for a first-time author hasn't gone up in 30 years.

Will a new writer make money?

For every Steven King, there are a dozen guys like me who make a good living. For every David Brin, there are a dozen authors who have managed to make it their day job. For each of them, there are a dozen more for whom writing is a terrific supplement.

How should a scientist prepare themselves for fiction writing?

Get a tough skin. And write. ■

Interview by **Nicola Jones**, a commissioning editor for *Nature's* Opinion section.

For more on how to write science books for different audiences, see go.nature.com/WvnBnn