

**COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA**  
**Sci-Fi at the New Millennium****DIPLOMATIC PLANET SPECIAL PRESENTATION**  
**WITH**  
**GREG BEAR****Communications and Media**  
**Waging War with the Publishing Industry**  
**Greg Bear**  
**Special Presentation - Diplomatic Planet (1999)**

Introduction- The Science-Fiction writer has always been a combination of social/cultural commentator, believer in science as an enabler of possibilities, and a prognosticator. Whether the elements are fatalistic, fantastic or fun - science fiction has always been more about the choices that we can make as individuals and as civilizations with some implied recognition that the universe is not a deterministic machine that grinds on in spite of our ideas and efforts.

In a sense, the best science fiction has always left the reader with a doorway that is slightly open and over which there is a sign that reads "HOPE FOR THE FUTURE".

The viewpoint of one of the most lauded and respected authors should attract your attention - particularly when that person is looking at the established publishing industry and giving some practical 'free advice' together with a 'free warning' !

**Sci-Fi at the New Millennium**

**Greg Bear:** "This piece was commissioned by The Writer magazine as an overview of Science Fiction today. It went a bit beyond their mandate, and entered controversial territory, so they rejected it..."

"I've been ringing this particular bell in the science fiction community for over ten years now. It seems to me the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, is the best place to post this piece... for the time being. Compare these comments with my articles on the future of fiction, available at my web site.

"The recent purchase of Random House by German publisher Bertelsmann, combining all the imprints at Random House with Bantam/Doubleday/Dell, is just another example of the gigantism currently obsessing world business. This massive new conglomerate will be structured to resist, and finally to attempt to defeat, the huge retail chains that have been slowly taking over editorial control from publishers too weak or too timid to resist. The battleground will be, in part at least, the Internet."

**SF AT THE NEW MILLENNIUM (originally published 1999)****By Greg Bear**

Fiction published in book form is under extreme pressure from the dominant forms of entertainment at the end of the twentieth century-motion pictures and interactive games. New York publishing is undergoing a very real and possibly even catastrophic shakedown. Science fiction has not been immunized against this by its predictions of the very future we are now sliding into. In fact, because of long-standing prejudice in New York literary culture, science fiction may become even more marginalized than other forms of literature. Hereby hangs a tale of woe-and possibly of opportunity.

With the beginning of modern paperback publishing in the 1940s, science fiction became a mainstay in the publishing business, reliable and profitable. The post-war boom and interest in things scientific and technical, as well as exciting developments in space exploration, created an atmosphere of almost unlimited opportunity.

Those who loved and supported the range of imaginative literature built their science fiction lines despite the general ignorance and conservatism of New York literary pundits, creating a viable and immensely influential movement.

Today, the results of their efforts-the effect of science fiction on our culture--is almost incalculable. Verne, Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Sir Arthur C. Clarke, Gene Roddenberry, Ursula K. Le Guin, and many, many more have raised and trained a generation of thinkers who stand ready to push Western culture to worldwide limits. From science to aerospace to computers, and finally to politics, science fiction has been one of the most formative artistic and philosophical movements in the twentieth century. Yet in New York, the divisions between scientific culture and the so-called humanities described in C.P. Snow's "The Two Cultures" have stayed firmly in place.

Among the old guard who form the upper management and critical apparatus of modern book culture, science fiction has often been relegated to a walled-off enclave, the publishing equivalent of a ghetto, querulously regarded as an inferior genre fit only for teenage boys.

Those teenage boys (and not a few teenage girls) have now become very powerful indeed. Some are billionaire software moguls, senators, and congressional representatives; others have changed the face of modern science and industry. Still others have moved on to re-shape the motion picture business, creating some of the most popular (and highest-grossing) films of our time. Culturally, the ghetto now surrounds New York literary culture, which has built its own walled enclave.

As we approach the next millennium, the quality of science fiction has improved to where it is competitive, in every regard, with any other kind of fiction. Yet fiction publishing in general, including science fiction, is suffering the worst decline in modern memory. Lists are being cut, the careers of young and beginning authors are prematurely judged and brought to an abrupt end. Retailers, sensing a basic weakness in New York publishers, have taken control of many decisions once reserved for editors.

The severe reduction of the number of independent distributors (IDs) in the last two years has put an almost intolerable strain on fiction publishing, and may spell the end of the mass-market paperback book that first gave rise to the boom in science fiction.

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**Greg Bear is the author of more than thirty books of science fiction and fantasy, including BLOOD MUSIC, THE FORGE OF GOD, DARWIN'S RADIO, and QUANTICO.**

**He is married to Astrid Anderson Bear and is the father of Erik and Alexandra.**

**Awarded two Hugos and five Nebulas for his fiction, one of two authors to win a Nebula in every category, Bear has been called the "Best working writer of hard science fiction" by "The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction."**

**His most recent novel is QUANTICO, a near-future examination of law enforcement, politics, and terror both domestic and religious.**

**DARWIN'S RADIO and DARWIN'S CHILDREN (1999, 2003) form a sequence about viruses and human evolution and are published by Del Rey and HarperCollins UK.**

**His stories have been collected into an omnibus volume by Tor Books.**

**Bear has served on political and scientific action committees and has advised Microsoft Corporation, the U.S. Army, the CIA, Sandia National Laboratories, Callison Architecture, Inc., Homeland Security, and other groups and agencies.**

**Source: <http://www.gregbear.com/biography.cfm>**

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Perhaps the most devastating handicap of all is publishing's current marketing system. Agent Richard Curtis (who represents me and several hundred other writers, including many science fiction writers) comments: "The [worst] villain is a marketing system based on the consignment selling--returnability--of books. Fifteen years ago I warned that it was impossible for publishers to make money shipping two books and taking one back. The cure is for the industry to find a way around that system."

Computer tracking of inventory has resulted in the best sellers selling more, and newer authors being given two, perhaps three chances to break into the high mid-list or watch their careers perish abruptly. Today, because of author tracking in the computers of chain bookstores and several times to keep a career going-in effect, starting over again and again.

In this new marketplace, it is likely that my own career would have foundered before the publication of my most successful books.

Overall (and with significant exceptions) fiction publishing has become an uncoordinated and confused attempt to chase after an aging and fickle audience distracted by child-raising and career management problems of their own. Time for reading has been reduced in core reading audiences. Many have fled to television and to movies. Younger audiences, particularly young males--still the most reliable readership for science fiction--have gone over in significant numbers to computer and video games, to MTV and movies skillfully designed to appeal to under-30 audiences.

In New York, many publishers have reacted to this competition by reducing editorial staffs, doubling up on workloads, and by giving more power over editorial decisions to sales departments. Acquisition of once-independent houses by conglomerates has resulted in further cost-cutting measures. Profitability in publishing, always low, has now dropped to disastrous levels, often three percent or less.

In the face of conglomeration and competition, many New York publishers have responded by chasing after lucrative contracts with media tie-ins. Traditionally unwilling to fight back with publicity and advertising, or unable to spend any significant sums of their own money on promotion because of cash-flow reductions, fiction publishing has been slowly languishing for the last twenty years, coming down from the highs of the late seventies to abysmal lows.

Following this decades-long trend, a kind of brain-drain has followed. While editors have continued to be drawn from a pool of the enthusiastic and dedicated lovers of books, the quality of top business and financial managers assigned to run publishers has in many instances deteriorated. Salaries in publishing have not kept pace with West Coast entertainment equivalents, and it is not cheap to live in New York. Marketing expertise has suffered a similar decline, and not just because the best marketing students are soon hired away by other companies paying much more. In fact, marketing in New York publishing has been almost a lost trade for more than forty years. Marketing and advertising for books is virtually nonexistent.

As a result, magazines, newspapers, and television-always conscious of where ad revenues come from-have reduced their coverage of books to a disastrous degree. CNN has a "Hollywood Minute," but would not be caught dead with a "New York Minute." Newspapers, ostensibly purchased by people who read, devote very few column-inches to books, and pages and pages to motion pictures, because studios spend hundreds of millions on ads every year. Publishers spend almost nothing in comparison.

We live in a culture where businesses live or die based on their success in advertising, and New York publishing chooses not to compete.

Despite the demand by readers for books catering to particular tastes - niche marketing, the hot growth industry in other forms of retailing - New York publishers are in many cases being forced to reduce variety and titles, and to put their remaining resources behind fewer books, many of them media tie-ins. This is certainly not a healthy response.

The feedback echo of all these inadequacies is threatening to drastically alter the business of fiction publishing.

In Los Angeles, there is little effective bias against science fiction. (Though a kind of institutional prejudice remains--such films never win Oscars for other than technical achievements!) Each year, dozens of science fiction movies are produced by studios eager to tap into a huge general interest in the future and our changing world. Filmmakers such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Robert Zemeckis, and James Cameron, raised on SF, treat it with imagination and respect, and reach enormous

audiences. Yet motion picture studios face daunting challenges, and with science fiction movies costing, typically, sixty million dollars and up, movies can't hope to compete with books for variety and originality. Books are far cheaper to produce and far less risky. This is to the advantage of published fiction. But the amounts of money brought in by a successful motion picture can dwarf the earnings of entire book divisions!

Given this admittedly short overview, how can an aspiring science fiction writer hope to start a career and survive? There are a number of hopeful answers to the dilemma. Here's a short-form list of survival techniques for any fiction author working today:

1) Write only what you love, and give it your very best shot. You'd better love science; it is the spine of your story! You're in the ring with tough grizzled veterans. You have only one or two punches before you are KO'd, or even worse, pulled out of the ring by a squeamish referee. In short, from the start, you must write books that are imaginative, inventive, important and ambitious, and appeal to a broad audience. The audience for fiction and for science fiction is, surprisingly, still very large-but it is disorganized, practically begging for guidance and direction. Maybe you'll be the one to give it to them-but they no longer respond to the blandishments of snobbish and specialized authors. Tell them with conviction and passion what the future is really going to be like, in your less-than-humble opinion. Scare them, shock them, exalt them-take risks! Only by gambling big can you win in this game.

2) Find competitive publishers. They're out there, and a few are poised to take over the market share of their less competent fellows. In the next five years, a number of major publishers are going to close their fiction lines, or go under completely. Develop an instinct for the business and culture of publishing.

3) Finding a knowledgeable agent is more important than ever. Talk to other clients-get a sense of personality, style, and expertise. Educate yourself as to the legal ins and outs of the client-agent relationship. Be wise and circumspect: Do not jump from agency to agency on the mere suspicion that they are simply not working hard enough-remember, it's as tough a market as any seasoned pro has ever seen. The fault may lie with you and your work, not the agent. Above all, communicate effectively with your agent. A good agent's instincts could protect you against association with failing or incompetent publishers.

4) Work with your editors and publishers as a thoroughgoing professional. Editors do not have time to pull you up by your bootstraps. Give them books they can sell to broad and diverse audiences, books with strong characters and strong points of view: works with crossover appeal.

5) Do not try to compete with TV or motion pictures, either in treatment or subject matter! Books are their own special and wonderful art form. They hit us at a deeper and more personal level, with a delayed fuse. Take advantage of this! Somehow, the motion picture industry manages to produce fine motion pictures every year, despite institutionalizing one of the most soul-grinding creative processes since trying to find patrons in the warring city-states of Italy. I love movies, but given the choice, I'll stick with books. Books have more freedom, more variety, and (generally) sole credit that cannot be disputed!

6) Get acquainted with the Internet. Setting up your own web page, creating your own advertising, using this new medium could be very effective. Publishing on the web is still in its infancy, but may, in the next ten years, provide a haven for start-up writers.

7) Don't quit your day-job. Always good advice for beginning writers, it is now essential. Writing for many of us is going to become what it once was almost exclusively: a personal mode of expression, not a reliable means of supporting ourselves, much less becoming filthy rich.

8) Cultivate your local small press publisher. They are often capable of producing beautiful books on a shoestring budget. If some of the major New York fiction publishers tank, many small press publishers will be ready and able to take up the slack, perhaps shifting book culture from the east coast to middle America and the west. If that wave comes, ride it. Bookstores-especially the superstores-today need more product, and more variety, than ever before. There is a market-it is just a changing and ever-more-challenging market!

9) Don't be a snob. Write what you love, but don't attach yourself to the prejudices of those arbiters who came before you, be they college professors, fellow writers, the New York Times or your favorite science fiction fan magazine.

10) Remember this above all: literature is a lucky privilege, not a protected institution. Writing for a living is a form of entertainment. It's vaudeville. Whether it results in critical acclaim and academically accepted literature is up to posterity: you are as vulnerable as any old-time vaudeville artist to changing market demands!

In an article I wrote for THE WRITER eleven years ago, I offered general advice for those who may not understand science fiction, but were hoping to move into a friendly and lucrative field of fiction-writing. I no longer encourage this. Science fiction fandom is still friendly, and writers receive a lot of encouragement, but the field has become much tougher.

If you do not know and love science fiction, do not try to write it. The competition is fierce. As I've hinted above, this is, perversely, a true golden age for science fiction writing. The best SF writers ever are working and publishing today. Yet we are under real pressure to simply survive, and good writers find their careers coming to an end, fairly or unfairly, every year.

If you really have the spark within you, nurture it, keep your eyes wide open, work hard, and with some luck, you will survive. What happens in the next ten years is going to be fascinating.

Be adaptable. It seems likely that future media, delivered over the internet, must include text publishing. There are more potential readers for fiction today than ever before. If a significant number of east coast companies give up the ghost of fiction publishing, the demand will shift to other sources, and with the internet, these sources do not have to be located in any particular place.

Global publication of electronic texts, delivered to home computers or cheap, portable, and convenient hand-held personal playback systems, will replace magazines and the paperback book within the next ten years. (There will likely always be a market for hardcovers, fancy trade paperbacks, and art editions, simply because many readers will prefer solid copies of books.)

Many writers are already aware of these possibilities, and are fully prepared to be pioneers. Be flexible. Be critical. Accept nothing at face value.

Is it at all strange that a world of change has caught up and transformed science fiction, the literature of change ?

DPlanet: We thank Greg Bear for Permission to publish this Special Presentation.

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