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British Fantasy Society Open Night – York, August 30th.

Once again York plays host to an Open Night for the British Fantasy Society. The event will almost certainly be held (again) at York Brewery – a hugely popular venue with the regular Open Night crowd.

Details will be confirmed closer to the event at prism.britishfantasysociety.org; probably here, too.

The Future We Deserve Alasdair Stuart

Like many of my plans, it was simple and, like many of my plans it didn't happen. On the last morning of my degree, I would climb to the top of York Minster with a CD player and, as the dawn rose, belt out 'It's the end of the world as we know it' by REM over the city. Because, you see, it was the end of my degree. That world was about to end, metaphorically. See what I did there?

Yeah. Like I say, that didn't happen and that's probably a good thing. If nothing else I'd have startled cyclists and pigeons.

But that song's stayed with me ever since and at times it's easy to embrace it a little too much. This, by the way, is the moment where I look down Digression Avenue, filled with discussions about heating prices, food, the moral bankruptcy of politicians and how soon we'll all be fighting for the last petrol in a post-apocalyptic wasteland wearing leather jackets with single bits of armour over the shoulders.

Digression Avenue though is not for us today. The reason? Simple; next year, you'll be able to go into space. Of course, those of you who are astronauts, cosmonauts and taikonauts (Incidentally if any of you are, get in contact, we'd love to talk to you) already can, but as of next year Virgin Galactic will, for a mere hundred thousand pounds, take you into parabolic orbit.

Now, of course that's not a small amount of money despite what some quarters of the internet seem to think. It's the cost of my house, for one, it's an impossibly huge amount of cash but what it isn't is a military budget. It isn't something that requires dozens of stern faced men and women, dedicated launch facilities, Billy Bob Thornton being dedicated and wry and Aerosmith providing the score. It's a small amount of money compared to what it used to cost and know what?

It'll get smaller. Quickly.

We are eight years into the twenty-first century and for a lot of people I know, anger and bitterness and cynicism are default approaches to any interaction with any higher authority. I remember seeing a t-shirt around 2000 saying 'It's the future, where's my jetpack?' and that ennui, that sense that the future we got was in fact a badly video taped copy is difficult to shake.

Until stories like this arrive. Because in a few years, normal people will be able to go into space. The future just got a little closer, a little easier to touch. It's not quick and it's not being born easily but the future we were promised, the future that starts with the likes of Frank Hampton, the future where Earth isn't the only place we live, just got a little closer. That's good news however you cut it, and even better it means that I don't have to climb the Minster with the CD player just yet. Let's face it, that's something we can all be thankful for.





Petey's Christmas

by Steve Calvert

"There is no Santa-Fucking-Claus, Petey. Never has been, never will be. It's all just make-believe." Sam was in a bad mood. He had been drinking. Again.

"But there must be a Santa-"

Sam's hand moved so fast that Petey felt the blow before he even saw it coming. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the floor and his left ear was throbbing. All he could hear in that ear now was a constant humming.

"Don't back-chat me Boy. There's plenty more where that came from."

Petey was going to be twelve in January. He was a big boy now and he knew that big boys were not supposed to cry. But he cried anyway. He just couldn't help it. His mother watched him

from the sofa. She had a concerned look on her face and Petey could see tears in her eyes. But she said nothing. She did nothing. There was nothing she could do. If she tried to intervene Sam would only hit her too.

Petey hated it when Sam hurt his Mummy. If Petey's Daddy had still been alive he wouldn't have let anyone hurt Mummy. He wouldn't have let anyone hurt Petey either. But if his Daddy had still been alive Mummy would never have met Sam in the first place.

"Well, what are you just lying there for? Get over there and sit with your mother."

Sliding his bottom along the floor, Petey used his legs to push himself backwards. Away from Sam. Once he felt that he was at a safe distance he stood up.

"Errrrr ..." Sam reached back his hand and took a step forwards.

Petey turned and ran to his mother, dropping onto his knees by her side and burying his head in her lap. He didn't hear Sam come after him. Instead he heard Sam laughing at him, and then the sound of the springs squeaking in his chair as he sat down.

"Try and be a good boy for Sam, Petey," Mummy whispered, "Try and be a good boy." She scooped her arms underneath him and lifted him onto her knee. She looked at his ear, then over at Sam.

"It's about time you taught that Brat of yours some manners Glenda."

"He was just excited about Christmas Sam. It's only natural. All kids are like that. You must remember what it was like to be a child."

"Either you teach him Glenda or I will." Sam picked up the remote control and pointed it at the TV. The picture was covered with sparkling flecks of light. "Damn, bloody TV."

"It's probably the weather Sam. No good getting yourself worked up over it."

Sam aimed the remote and tried another station. If anything this one was worse. He tried another, but it was just as bad.

"They said it might snow tonight."

"Look out the window Glenda. I don't see any snow. Do you?" His temper was getting worse and she didn't answer him.

Sam pressed the remote again and the TV went blank. Then he picked up his can from the floor and took a couple of gulps. Empty. He crunched it up in his hand and tossed it at the Christmas tree in the corner of the room. It hit one of the tree's glass balls and then dropped to the floor, taking little pieces of jagged silver with it. Petey's mother placed a finger to his lips and held him tightly, rocking him in her arms.

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"I'm going to the pub for a couple of hours," Sam said, standing up. "And when I get back you'd better be in bed Petey. Do you understand me?"

"Yes Sam."

"I'll see *you* later," Petey watched as Sam leant over to give his mother a kiss. She turned her face away though. Sam didn't like that. He reached behind her head and took hold of a handful of her hair; twisting it. She screamed and lifted her head to look at him.

"Later ... alright?" He pressed his mouth roughly against hers and kept it there a long time. When he stopped and let go of her hair her lip was bleeding. "Later."

There is a Santa, isn't there?" Petey asked when his mother had stopped crying. She raised the corners of her lips into a smile, held it for a second and then let it drop. Sam wasn't the only one who had told him that there was no Santa. Some of his friends had school had said so too. They had said that it was his mother that put the presents under the tree. Petey hadn't believed his friends though. Now, with what Sam had said, he wasn't so sure.

He thought back to last year. His Mother *had* worked a lot of extra hours in the weeks before Christmas. He'd thought that it must just be a busy time of year. Now he wondered if she hadn't worked all of those extra hours so that she could buy him presents. He raised his eyes up to her face.

"Mummy, there is a Santa isn't there?"

Glenda looked down at her son's tear streaked face. At his still red, still very sore looking ear. What harm could it do for him to have something to believe in for just one more year. Every little boy needs a little magic in his life. "Yes Petey, there *is* a Santa, but it's probably best not to talk about Santa in front of Sam. Okay?"

“Okay,” Petey agreed, but somehow he didn’t believe his mother anymore, and inside he felt empty, like he had just lost a friend.

“Now,” his mother said, “you’d best hurry on up to bed, before Sam gets back.”

“Okay Mummy.”

“And before you go to sleep I want you to wish *very* hard Petey. Because if you wish *very* hard Santa will hear your wish and know what you want, more than anything else, for Christmas ... Night, night Petey.”

“Night, night Mummy.”

“And don’t forget, wish very hard now.”

“I will mummy, night, night.”

Petey brushed his teeth and got into his pajamas. Then, after he’d said his prayers, he made his wish to Santa, but he still wasn’t convinced that there was a Santa anymore. He did hope so though.

Lying in his bed, he looked out of the window. The sky was dark blue and it had started to snow. At first it was just little flakes, but then they got bigger. He watched them dancing on the wind. In the morning he would build a snowman.

He fell asleep.

When Petey woke up he didn’t know what time it was, but it was still dark outside and the snow was still falling in big, white flakes. At first he didn’t know what had woken him up. But then he heard a noise. It came from the roof. Someone was moving around on the roof.

Petey held his breath and tried to listen. The footsteps seemed to be moving towards the far end of the house. Towards the chimney. He couldn’t believe it. “Santa!” He said, his heart filling up with joy as the words left his lips. His friends at school had been wrong. Sam had been wrong too. Wrong or just lying to him. There was a Santa.

He kept listening.

The footsteps stopped at the chimney and then there were other noises in their place. What was Santa doing up there?

Then there was a loud thump. Something skidded down the roof, clattering, and bouncing along the tiles.

Something dropped past Petey’s window and he thought for a second that Santa must have dropped his sack. Until he heard the scream.

“SANTA!” Petey jumped out of bed and rushed over to the window, flinging it open.

Below his window, on the ground, was a body.

But it wasn’t Santa.

It was Sam. His body was shaking all over and Petey knew it wasn’t because of the cold.

Beneath Sam, Petey could see the TV Aerial. Sam had landed on top of it and impaled himself on one of its long, round prongs. It had gone straight through him and Petey could see it sticking out of his back. Red blood was pumping out of his broken body, discoloring the snow and forming steam in the cold night air.

Sam twitched, went rigid for a moment, and then was still. He was dead, and Petey now felt sure that there was a Santa after all.

If you enjoyed this week’s tale, and the non-fiction that follows, please make a donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk.

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Interview with William Gibson Part One

Words: Richard Whittaker

In part one of a two-part interview, author William Gibson discusses how technology affects literature, and what literature has to say about technology.



"That's something that tends to happen with new technologies generally: The most interesting applications turn up on the battlefield, or in a gallery." – Bobby Chombo in William Gibson's *Spook Country*.

William Gibson invented the future by accident. That, he argues, is always the way it works. The godfather of cyberpunk was the man that created a literary model for the psychology of pure electronic communication. During the 1980s and early 1990s, copies of Gibson's Sprawl trilogy (*Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) were as much a fixture in the average computer researcher's book shelf as a C++ manual. With his latest book, *Spook Country*, he creates a near-past in which computer users meta-tag the real world. But if engineers start looking at the fictional nuts and bolts of the machinery, Gibson worries that they may have missed the point. "I've always assumed, perhaps unfairly, that the great majority of scientists and technologists miss the core of the text. They tend to focus on the gizmo and the imaginary technology, which is the easy part: it seems to grow out of me like fingernails. They miss the sociological commentary, which for me is what the work is about."

Raised in rural Virginia, Gibson spent most of his adult life in British Columbia, influenced by the end of hippy culture and the rise of punk. He also credits another cultural influence: Bruce Sterling, who he called "the first person that I ever heard express how technology affects people." It was that sociological impact, rather than the machines themselves, that interested him. He admits to a certain technophobia, even about the Web that he had been so prescient about. "I completely avoided it until there was no learning curve," he said, adding that he didn't even have an email account until the mid-90s. "I said I'd do it when dogs and children could do it." For him, what is most interesting is how people interact with the technology, even when it doesn't work so well. "Some people seem to take a perverse pleasure in the difficulty of it, which must be like radio in the 1920s. I remember my uncles would hand-wind their radio coils so they could hear the signal from Cincinnati."

But just because he wasn't an early adopter himself didn't mean he couldn't write about them, and how the equipment was affecting society at that moment. He explained, "When I began to write science fiction, I came from an academic and literary background - enough to know that science fiction is about the moment in which it was written. That's the only way we can read it historically. *1984* works best when you know it was written in 1948." He applies that logic to his own work. "I began with the assumption that *Neuromancer* would be about 1984," he explained. "That's the secret strength of my work, and I've constantly been amazed that the way that seemed to be secret."

His latest book, *Spook Country*, deals with all the vintage Gibson themes: Social paranoia, corporate power, and the mutation of machinery beyond the inventor's whim. A sequel of sorts to 2003's *Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country* sees the return of the shadowy Blue Ant Corporation, a PR agency so innovative and subversive that even its employees scarcely know it exists. From this shadowy existence springs its power as the company and its CEO, Hubertus Bigend, become the ultimate peddlers and controllers of secret information: As one character tells another, "Advertising is intelligence turned inside out." If that meme sounds familiar, it's because this is not set in the distant future, but in 2006. A book, Gibson explained, has "bits of pieces of the time it was written, and the past that lead to that day."

The title *Spook Country* is a play on words. It is, in many ways, a spy novel about inadvertent spies. There's ex-rock star Hollis Henry, hired by Bigend to research a story for a magazine that may not even exist; Milgrim, a junkie hacker who may or may not be working for the Drug Enforcement Agency; And Tito, a Cuban-American skilled in a form of spycraft called Systema (which seems to mix free running, capoeira and ninjitsu) who may or may not be trafficking iPods full of data for the Russian mob. All three work for shadowy agencies, making them spooks in the employ of phantoms.

But there are the other spooks: invisible objects around the world, created by artists who are using GPS systems and virtual reality goggles to meta-tag the world and make every location a work of art. Wear the right equipment in the right place, and a flower market becomes a meadow, an office building is consumed by a Mongolian Death Worm, or River Phoenix is lying dead on the ground in front of the Viper Room. What fascinates Gibson is not that it's futuristic, but that it's possible now. "It's not imaginary, but it's not

any less fantastic for being real," said Gibson. "We're surrounded by inherently fantastic technology, and we just don't have a cultural paradigm to examine it."

That fantastical technology is something he indirectly helped create through his books. In the *Sprawl* sequence, Gibson created a new literary reality. He took the dystopian corporate horror and near-future action visuals of the recently-released *Blade Runner* and *Escape from New York*, extrapolated out from the communally addictive qualities of video gaming, and then added that all to the influence of the Beat writers and cultural experimentalists like William S. Burroughs that he had grown up reading. It was a break with, not a continuation of, much sci-fi to that date, which he had considered at one point writing an academic thesis on as a form of fascist literature.

Most importantly, it was Gibson that popularized the concept cyberspace. In *Neuromancer*, his first novel, he called it "A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation." Which is pretty alarmingly close to how the Internet turned out.

Gibson compares the impact of his work to that of Arthur C. Clarke, which had a similar psychological impact on the scientific community. Neither could re-write the laws of physics, but both helped set the agenda for technological development by talking about potential machines. "One of the differences between (Clarke) and myself," he said, "Is that he believed he was writing about the future, and to a remarkable extent he was, because he was a scientist." Gibson was an author, first and foremost.

Like Al Gore, Gibson didn't invent the Internet (and, just like Gore, he has never claimed that he did). His key argument was that the system evolved beyond anyone's vision or control. "In the early 21st century," said Gibson, "there was some myth that we legislated and made these technologies emerge. I think these technologies have come out of pure and naked need, and then the market met that need. The people who invent new technology never have any idea about how they will affect society. The whole thing is inherently out of control."

"To some very large extent, the US military is where we get the Internet. It was the product of the DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) research making its way into the hands of acid heads," said Gibson. The first backbone machines of the thing that would become the Web were installed as ARPANET – a U.S. military project - in 1969. By the 1980s, it had been joined by systems like the UK-based JANET (the Joint Academic Network), but none of the original designers could have conceived of what the web would be today. "I think that, if the US government had seen what the Internet would have become, they would have shut it down," said Gibson. "No government would have wanted to fund something so subversive."

Just as the nascent web powered his early work, GPS is the Maguffin for *Spook Country*. For Gibson, it's only within the well-funded realms of the military industrial complex that such systems could be developed: But they only get fun when they leave the lab: "The military seem to look at everything, and they're very much in the role of patronage for purely blue sky research. Relatively little of the research they fund will make its way to the battlefield because it isn't practical. Every so often they release huge amounts of files on failed projects: Like the bomb that made enemy soldiers gay," Gibson said. "The thing is, they're up to things like that, but we get the benefit of all that research, because once it's been done, that leaks out into the world."

He also doesn't blame military and corporate engineers for how their research has reached out into society, and the impact it has had. "Most technology is morally neutral," he said. "I'm sure that none of the telecoms developers that created wireless pagers never knew that they were revolutionizing prostitution or drug dealing, and that they were dooming certain neighborhoods."

Next Week

In part 2 of this interview, Gibson discusses how he writes, his relationship with music, why the past is the new future, and how editors have had trouble keeping up with technology.

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