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High-tech adventurer revels in geekiness

By Brier Dudley
Seattle Times technology columnist

If you saw Neal Stephenson on the street, you might think he's just another geeky Seattle guy with a particularly impressive goatee.

He blends right into this town of musicians, computer scientists and creative types — so well that you might never guess he's a best-selling science-fiction author whose prescience, technical acumen and storytelling have made him into a guru to the techno-intellectual caste.

Writing with a fountain pen in the basement of his Mount Baker home, Stephenson produces mind-blowing, thousand-page novels, usually centered on humble, good-hearted intellectuals caught in storms of technological, social and historical change.

Academics have compared Stephenson with Thomas Pynchon and William Gibson, although his new book coming out Sept. 9, "Anathem," adds JK Rowling and Isaac Asimov to the mix.

"In a way, it's like Harry Potter for grown-ups," said Stephenson's friend George Dyson, a Bellingham scientific historian, author and kayak builder.

Yet, Stephenson is more than an author. He's a jack of all trades contributing to some of the area's most secretive and intriguing high-tech ventures, where he works part time, after his morning writing sessions.

That is, when he's not practicing sword fighting or making armor in his underground machine shop, like Iron Man with fewer gadgets.



CHRIS JOSEPH TAYLOR / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Seattle author Neal Stephenson's latest novel, "Anathem," will be released Sept. 9. He's a jack of all trades contributing to some of the area's most secretive and intriguing high-tech ventures, where he works part time, after his morning writing sessions.



CHRIS JOSEPH TAYLOR / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Lately, Neal Stephenson has been part of the team of inventors at Intellectual Ventures, a Bellevue idea factory started by ex-Microsoft Chief Technology Officer Nathan Myhrvold, with backing from Bill Gates and others. His new book, "Anathem," will be released Sept. 9.

"He's mild-mannered, as long as he doesn't have a sword in his hand," said another friend, composer and ex-Microsoft engineer David Stutz.

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Before that, Stephenson spent seven years helping Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos start Blue Origin, a commercial spaceflight company in Kent.

"He's always thinking about lots of things — he's a pollinator, he brings ideas to the table," Stutz explained.

Tech companies still refer to Stephenson's 1991 novel "Snow Crash," a thriller that popularized the concepts of virtual worlds and avatars.

Retired Microsoft executive Linda Stone said the book was required reading for her team when she started Microsoft Research's virtual worlds group in 1994. Stone invited Stephenson to speak on campus and introduced him to computer scientists, mathematicians and physicists.

"There have been many inspiring science-fiction writers, but each has a unique thing to offer," Stone said. "Neal is absolutely, profoundly inspiring."

Step back in time

Stephenson's recent books went back in time. He traced the genesis of computing and cryptography in the 1999 hit "Cryptonomicon." Then he tackled the dawn of economics and globalization in the epic, three-volume "Baroque Cycle" that was finished in 2004.

"Anthem" looks into the future, while exploring philosophy, religion and social change. It's set on a planet called Arbre and reflects Stephenson's concerns about anti-intellectualism.

"It's meant to be a good yarn and a story that you can dive into on its own merits. But if you want to go all interpret-y on me, there are clearly some connections between that world and the world we're living in now," Stephenson said, sporting a Leatherman tool in a belt holster and a formidable-looking knife handle sticking out of his jeans pocket.

"I don't want to just sit here and rattle them all off, and beat people over the head with them, because that makes for a bad relationship between author and reader, but I think anyone who looks at it can see the points of similarity."

A few physical similarities are obvious. It begins in a monastery that maintains a fantastic clock providing continuity through the ages. This machine was inspired by a clock that the Long Now Foundation, made up of San Francisco philosophical techies, is building to run for 10,000 years — a monument to "long-term thinking."

Author appearances

NEAL STEPHENSON will make several public appearances around the release of his new book, "Anthem."

Sept. 9: A release party for "Anthem" with a musical performance by David Stutz is scheduled for 7 p.m. at the Regency Ballroom in San Francisco. Tickets are \$10, at www.longnow.org.

Sept. 14: Stephenson will discuss "Anthem" at 5:30 p.m. Third Place Books in Lake Forest Park.

Sept. 15: Stephenson will discuss "Anthem" at 7 p.m. at University Temple United Methodist Church in Seattle.

When he started writing "Anathem," Stephenson would attend concerts of renaissance and medieval chorus music by Stutz at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral on Capitol Hill.

St. Mark's

"There's something about St. Mark's — it fits perfectly with the story of 'Anathem' because it's ancient and modern at the same time," Stephenson said.

"It has the general shape and style of a medieval church, but you get inside and you can see that the walls are poured concrete and the altarpiece is kind of a high-tech thing.

"I don't know the right way to describe it, but it's exactly the right mix — that, combined with the music, just got me in the right frame of mind to work on the book."

Stutz created music appropriate to its setting, exploring "whether there would be liturgies that treated scientific truths and mathematics and philosophy as things to be revered or things to be celebrated," he said.

The CD goes on sale this month, and Stutz will donate profits to the Long Now Foundation.

Stutz thinks "Anathem" is one of Stephenson's best books. "It's a great combination of big, big ideas and rollicking plot — how can you go wrong with that?"

Stephenson describes his special blend a little differently.

"There's veg-out novels, and there's geek-out novels," he said. "I'm tending to write geek-out novels, although I try to put some fun stuff into them, too, so you can enjoy a little bit of vegging out between the geeky parts."

Consider this passage, where a techie named Sammann explains problems with the network to the main character, a monk named Erasmus:

"Early in the Reticulum — thousands of years ago — it became almost useless because it was cluttered with faulty, obsolete, or downright misleading information," Sammann said.

"Crap, you once called it," I reminded him.

"Yes — a technical term. So crap filtering became important. Businesses were built around it. Some of those businesses came up with a clever plan to make more money: they poisoned the well. They began to put crap on the Reticulum deliberately, forcing people to use their products to filter that crap back out. They created syndevs whose sole purpose was to spew crap into the Reticulum. But it had to be good crap."

So, what will be the lasting effect of Stephenson's work?

"It's hard to tell," said Jon Lewis, an English professor at University of North Carolina, at Pembroke, who teaches Stephenson's work in classes and published a collection of academic essays, "Tomorrow Through the Past: Neal Stephenson and the Project of Global Modernization."

"The quality of the work is there that he'll last and appeal to a variety of different disciplines — certainly people who are interested in artificial intelligence, computer science, cryptography — they're interested in what Neal has to say about different subjects."

Fertile ground

It seems natural that Stephenson's books would emerge from Seattle, a place where people build operating systems and airplanes, then relax by going to Wagner's "Ring" cycle. Those projects require commitment and focus, with a big payoff for those who persevere.

Stephenson, 48, was born in Maryland and raised in Iowa, where his mother was a biochemistry researcher and his father taught electrical engineering. The family had roots in the Northwest — his grandfather taught physics at Washington State University — and every summer they'd drive west for a monthlong vacation in the area.

He studied physics and geography at Boston University and moved to Seattle for a few years in 1984, while his wife did her medical residency, then moved here permanently in 1991.

Tinkering came naturally to a guy raised in farm country, in a house with a workshop and with a father who built the family's TV and electronic equipment from Heathkits. He started programming in college and still dabbles, using Mathematica software on a Mac.

"Farmers, of course, can build or fix anything," he said.

Stephenson is not sure he has the same level of skill, but he's sure it stirred his interest.

Friends, like Stone, were less understated.

"He's a builder, he's a creator, he's part engineer, part scientist and he has this splendid imagination," she said, adding that "there are a lot of wonderful people in the world, and even among them Neal is rare and special."

And she hasn't read "Anathem" yet.

Vegging vs. geeking out

Here's an edited excerpt from the interview, where Stephenson talks about vegging out versus geeking out. There's more posted on my blog:

"There's sort of a dichotomy now between two tendencies called 'vegging out' and 'geeking out.' People are stressed, they're tired from a long day, they just want to veg out — they collapse in front of the big-screen TV to watch television or play a video game. The idea is to do something easy as can be and places no demands on your brain or your attention span. I'm exhibit A of vegging out — I veg out all the time.

"If that was all that people did, we'd really be in trouble. But there's another countervailing activity that people do, which is geeking out — they'll pick some specific thing that they're really interested in and they'll know everything about it. It turns up in surprising places.

"You kind of expect it among high-tech geeks. But you can go anywhere in the country and you can find somebody who, maybe he's driving a forklift at Wal-Mart, but then he comes home and his passion is Civil War re-enactment. So that's his way of geeking out.

"I think that coincides with the redemption of geekiness in our culture. We used to call them nerds and they

were kind of scorned, and now we call them geeks.

"A geek, it's a term of approbation — it means someone who's a little weird, a little dorky in some ways, but they have something over which they have a complete mastery of skill and knowledge. If you need their services, they're a great person to have around.

"I think geeks geeking out is gradually replacing older institutions as a way that knowledge is preserved and developed in this society."

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