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Who is Ken MacLeod?

Introduction

One of the book discussons at this year's Wiscon features the work of Ken MacLeod. Although Ken's novels have now been published in the US by Tor, there is a good chance that many Wiscon members will be unfamiliar with this excellent Scottish writer. If you were scratching your head and wondering who this fellow might be, and why Wiscon is featuring his work, this short fanzine might help. Here you will find two interviews with the man himself, plus reviews of his four novels. We think you will find him fascinating, and look forward to telling you more about him at the discussion panel.

Cheryl Morgan & Roz Kaveney

Biography

Ken MacLeod was born in Stornoway in 1954 and more or less grew up in Greenock. He's worked as a biomechanics researcher, a clerk, and a computer programmer, and since 1997 has been a full-time writer. He lives in West Lothian with his wife and children and is currently finishing a new novel, *Cosmonaut Keep*.

Trots in Space

Let's face it, folks, only in Scotland would you find someone writing a science fiction novel about Trotskyists.

Well, maybe quite not only, but it seems the most likely location. Furthermore, it is probably the case that only in Scotland would you find an SF author who writes about Trots and is a protégé of the ever so wonderful Mr. Iain (M.) Banks. Ken MacLeod has an excellent tutor, and presumably an exceptional capacity for beer.

But I digress. Steve Davies is the initiator of this little tale. He and I were chatting about books one evening. He asked me if I had read any MacLeod because he was really good. I said no but while I'm here I should promote good new British authors, so I'll give him a try. Then I got a progress report for Albacon. Sadly, it announced that Diana Wynne Jones had been in hospital and would not be fit in time to travel to the convention. They had recruited one Ken MacLeod to replace her. OK, so I'm going to get to meet the guy. I'd better read some of his stuff. Also

I'd better get back into the habit of serious drinking.

Steve had offered to lend me copies of the books, but I have this awful habit of wanting to own the darn things, so I picked up a copy of *The Star Fraction* in Reading on Saturday. I started it Sunday morning and by Monday evening I had finished it. Banksie is right, this guy is going to be a star. What is more, most of you, especially if you are not British, will never have read anything like it. It is just possible that it will mean a lot less if you were not at a British university in the 70's. Certainly you will wonder what all these strange political groups are, and whether MacLeod has made them up. He hasn't. MacLeod knows his stuff and he has the likes of the IMG and SWP off pat, not to mention the amazing tendency for schisms amongst extremist politicos of all flavours.

The book starts with standard future noire stuff: a research scientist specialising in memory-enhancing drugs, a mercenary with a very smart gun. This, however, is not *Neuromancer*, or even *Shadowrun*. It is British and left wing through and through. Our hero and heroine are soon on the run from evil American secret police (who happen to wear black suits and fly black helicopters). Soon they find themselves caught up in a revolution as the armies of the former Socialist government, exiled to Scotland, seeks to throw out the Royalists who were restored on the back of an American invasion after the end of WWIII.

The centrepiece of the story, however, is Norlonto, an anarchist free state established in North London after the war and granted autonomy by the Royalist government. Here various political subgroups are able to establish their own communities and experiment with social organisation. There are gays, there are fundamentalist Christians, there are communists. Inside the gay community there is even a small enclave of femininists (read it carefully, not feminists) who wear frilly dresses, high heels and loads of make-up, and preach knitting and embroidery as a cure for global violence.

Oh, did I forget to tell you that MacLeod has a wonderful sense of humour. There are some really, really awful puns as well. Be warned.

It is hard at times to work out exactly what political line MacLeod is pushing. This is at least in part due to the fact that he has taken to heart the inevitability of market forces. Towards the end of *The Star Fraction* the hero comments that if communism is to survive it must be able to do so within a free market for political ideas. That isn't a line you would have heard in the 70's.

What is clear is that MacLeod is pro-technology and hates the Greens with a vengeance. Generally he portrays them as Luddite fanatics who live in filth and squalor in the countryside, launching occasional raids to destroy as much of civilisation as they can. This isn't exactly a fair depiction of environmentalist policy, but it is becoming more typical of the Animal Liberation extremists.

Somehow, however, I get the impression that a lot of what MacLeod is doing is playing with ideas rather than proselytising. After all, a lot of SF has been devoted to exploring alternative societies. Very few of them, however (Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* being a classic exception) deal with Socialist or Communist ideas. It is good to see someone having a go at this, and managing to avoid the usual over-serious nature of left wing extremists. I'm sure MacLeod is serious in parts, but it is probably with tongue firmly in cheek that he transforms Trotsky's programme for revolution into a computer program. As

for where that program is stored, Mao's ghost will be killing himself laughing. Boy this was a good start.

The second novel, *The Stone Canal*, is set in the same universe but many years in the future. There is very little re-use of characters, although the hero did have a bit-part in the first book and turns out to be one of the founders of Norlonto. The action takes place on a colony world called New Mars which is at the far end of a wormhole constructed at Jupiter by the "fast folk", people who have uploaded their personalities into computers and now live and think at computer speeds. New Mars itself is a human colony, although many robots and bio-machines also live wild on the planet. There's a lot more to the plot than this, but it is far too complex to explain in a review.

The subject of the book is basically racism, as embodied by the example of robot rights. The heroine, Dee, is a sex toy, a human body with a computer brain programmed only to look pretty and please her owner. Someone has uploaded a lot of additional software into her brain, and she has become self-aware (or at least she thinks she has). Unsurprisingly, she runs away, and is taken in by a bunch of anarchists who regard the ownership of robots as slavery.

As we might expect, there is also a standard political argument going on. The society of New Mars is supposedly anarcho-capitalist but in practice is dominated by one or two major corporations, and in particular by one Dave Reid, an ex-IMG man (which should be enough to strike fear into the hearts of those of us familiar with the IMG). What MacLeod is attempting to do is portray the fight for the heart of the anti-statist movement. On the right wing we have the Libertarians, most of whom, at least from what I've seen in America, sum up their philosophy in the slogan, "I have the right to do whatever I want and to hell with the rest of you". Their part is taken by Reid.

In the red corner we have the Anarchists who generally take a more socially responsible attitude. They are championed by the hero, Jon Wilde, an old drinking buddy of Reid's, and whose wife's DNA Reid just happened to have used to create a certain sex toy. Wilde has the additional problem that he is dead, and whilst his brain patterns were preserved, it is not exactly certain whether the newly cloned body they have been put into classes as human, or even if it is the only copy of him that is in existence.

The structure of the book is very Banksian. Interwoven with the happenings on New Mars is a background story detailing Wilde's life, the rivalry between himself and Reid for the flirtatious Annette (later to be the pattern for Dee), and the origins or Norlonto and New Mars. It even has a delicious twist at the end that would have graced any Culture novel. It is great to see someone else doing this sort of thing.

As usual, MacLeod's sense of humour is in top gear. There are also a lot of side references to the SF community. Indeed, Norlonto's founders are a pro-space anarchist group with historical links to fandom. At one point in the historical section Reid asks Wilde whether he attended the big SF convention in Glasgow in 1995. He did, he had a dealer's stand selling space memorabilia.

In the end, of course, Dee wins her freedom and Wilde wins major changes to the social structure of New Mars. For now, MacLeod seems to have come down on the side of the angels. As Wilde says: "*In any half-decent society you're far better off respecting the law and property and so on*". OK, he wants people to be able to do that of their own free will rather than being forced to do it, but they have to

accept the consequences if they upset their neighbours. This is a far cry from being able to do whatever you want.

MacLeod's latest novel, *The Cassini Division*, follows more or less directly on from *The Stone Canal*. Wilde (well, one of him) has made it back through the wormhole to the solar system and finds Earth dominated by the anarcho-communist Solar Union. The book's title refers to the only remaining military force, a crack unit of space fighters dedicated to protecting earth from the "fast folk" who have taken refuge on Jupiter.

Although Wilde makes a brief appearance at the start of the book, he is not involved in the main plot. This centres mainly around one of the leading members of the *Cassini Division*. It is a brave move on MacLeod's part as it quickly becomes obvious that his heroine is a militarist fanatic with a deep loathing of machine life. Ellen is convinced that the computer-based life forms on Jupiter are dangerous monsters who have to be destroyed before they destroy us. The trouble is, she might be right.

The social structure of the Solar Union is something that Proudhon would be delighted with. There is no money, and no property. Nobody is employed, but everyone knows that they should work and that they should not take too much of the communal resources. MacLeod isn't exactly clear on why the system works. In part it is definitely because everyone who wishes to be a citizen has to believe in the society's social philosophy, the True Knowledge. Those who refuse to believe are exiled to Earth as "non-co-operatives". In addition I suspect that, like the Culture, the system is helped by having enough resources to keep all but the most covetous happy.

For once it is quite clear where Macleod's sympathies lie. He does a good job of showing how mindless adherence to a creed, even a beneficent one, creates a nation of unimaginative sheep. Ellen describes the culture of New Mars as a collection of petty tyrannies. Wilde, had he been given the opportunity to respond, would probably have retorted that if you were not prepared to be your own boss you were shirking your social responsibility. Towards the end, MacLeod does the obvious thing and throws the two societies together to see which one will survive. We don’t get to see the final outcome, but I suspect that the answer is coded in the closing events of the book.

To sum up, MacLeod is a fine writer with a wonderful sense of humour. His take on the future of human society is unlike anything you'll find elsewhere in SF at the moment. He also has some interesting things to say about artificial intelligence. If I have one major criticism it is that his revolutionaries are all far too nice. Even Dave Reid gets rehabilitated in the end. I see no reason why socialists should not have the same proportion of utter bastards amongst them as the rest of society. (The person who said "if they were bastards they would not be real socialists" can go and stand at the back of the class and see me afterwards.)

There are parts of Britain today where the rule of law has more or less broken down. In these places, you do not find friendly Trotskyist militias upholding the safety of the community, you find criminal gangs selling drugs and running prostitution and extortion rackets. If he really wants us to believe that his societies can work, he should show more of how they function under pressure.

The Star Fraction - Ken MacLeod - Legend - softcover

The Stone Canal - Ken MacLeod - Legend - hardcover

The Cassini Division - Ken MacLeod - Orbit - hardcover

This review is by Cheryl Morgan and first appeared in issue #37 of *Emerald City* (September 1998).

Interview: Ken talks to Andrew Adams

This interview was done at Albacon 98: Homeland, a science fiction convention in the Central Hotel, Glasgow. Thanks to Cameron for the recording and Pat McMurray and Cheryl Morgan for suggesting questions.

AAA: Your books posit an apparently inevitable move towards socialist and communist values. Do you see this as inevitable as resources become more readily available?

KM: No, I don't see anything as inevitable at all. In fact in the first two books, *The Star Fraction* and *The Stone Canal*, it almost comes as a little bit of a surprise at the end of both of them that there is this implied post-capitalist society beyond the end of the book. In *The Star Fraction* there is a casual reference in the final chapter to this twenty-seven volume history of the Pleistocene epoch which ends with capitalism. In *The Stone Canal* there's a post-capitalist society at the end and it is that idea that I expanded on in *The Cassini Division*. It's not seen in the books as inevitable, it's seen as contingent, as something that comes out of people's decisions and so on.

As to what I think in real life, I think it's that if resources do become more available and more accessible, or if something like nano-technology became widespread (that's the creation of molecule-sized machinery that can basically do for every product what computers do for information, i.e. produce vast quantities of it in increasingly corrupted forms) then I think that we'd find ourselves in the situation where something like free access and voluntary work would be an obvious solution to the question of how do you cope with abundance. Unfortunately, we're not in that position yet, so I think the jury is still very much out on the future of humanity in that respect.

AAA: You reference Science Fiction fandom a number of times in your books: there is a character who was at Intersection (The Worldcon in Glasgow in 1995), and there's a society based around fannish founders. How long have you been involved in Science Fiction fandom yourself, and how did you get involved?

KM: Intersection was actually the first SF convention I went to. Before that I had some contact with fandom going back quite a long way. My first contact with organised fandom was really quite a dismal event in Windsor, or Slough, or somewhere in between them, where there was an open-air SF convention. There was this vast encampment of tents in a park and I went along with Iain (M.) Banks and a woman who was either Iain's or my girlfriend at the time (I forget which: Iain stole her from me, but I forget whether it was before or after that).

We were wandering about this place, and I think fandom back in the 1970's was a bit different from what it is today in that almost the only women you could see there were the bored girlfriends of fans who were being dragged around in a rather oppressed-looking fashion, and the place was full of weirdos. Not the fans, but the Aetherius Society, those are the guys who flying saucers talk to. There were people dressed as Darth Vader, as Daleks and so on.

I saw a familiar face from the back of book jackets in the crowd: a rather plump guy with a goatee beard hurrying from one panel session to another, and said "Hello, you must be Harry Harrison," "No, I'm John Brunner."

Basically, I bought a few second-hand books and watched a film of H. G. Wells' *Things to Come*, projected on the back of a tent: projected the wrong way round so it was like a mirror image, and very small. So there was this crowd huddled round the tent watching this film trying to read the reversed subtitles.

After that, many years later in fact, and long before I actually started trying to write myself, I met a few SF fans at the place where I worked (London Electricity) and every so often we'd get together in London Electricity's bar: a very big, very fine building with chandeliers, very large ones: they have one in the entrance hall that looks like a flying saucer coming in to land. We'd talk about everything except SF. About military history; fantasy; weapons, not firearms but medieval weapons, the development and the use of the compound bow; Mongolian battle tactics.

So we decided to form an SF Society, so I drew up a poster and we got a few more people along and every couple of weeks we'd meet in the bar and talk about Mongolian battle tactics. Now and again we'd get a video. After a while we decided this was a bit limiting, and we decided to make some tentative contacts with the rest of the fannish universe. So we'd organise expeditions to the Three Tons, or whatever the pub was at the time where all of London fandom got together, and we'd sit in a corner, round a table and look at these strange famous faces that we'd vaguely recognise: David Langford (ooh). Sometimes we'd actually go and talk to them.

I think the only person in London fandom we ever made an ongoing contact with was Sylvia Starshine, who's a remarkable woman who is an artistic ironworker: she made the Hugo Awards for Intersection. So that was how I encountered fandom, and after that it's really all a complete blank until Intersection.

AAA: You mention going to that original convention with Iain (M.) Banks. You have been described as Iain's protégé. Do you find this flattering, insulting...?

KM: I'd say neither. I think protégé is rather an inadequate term. I'm a very close friend of Iain and he has not so much been a protector of me: he hasn't so much stood guard over my attempts at writing as stood behind them with a sharp stick.

Iain and I both started attempting to write SF when we were in high school together. Iain wrote great big thick books, which he sent off to publishers and had consistently rejected. I would write about five pages of handwriting in pencil and look at them and get depressed and not do anything else. But I would tell Iain all about them, the entire plot of the story.

Iain used to reciprocate in kind. There was one amazing afternoon, when there was an extension being built to our house in Greenock, and there were a couple of guys around building the porch, and Iain came round while I was helping out holding up the lights and so on (it was a dark cold afternoon). Iain told us the entire plot of *Against a Dark Background* over about three hours, and then went away. One of the carpenters said "Who was that guy? Bloody strange friends you have." I used to inflict similar things on him except they were much much vaguer: Iain had *Against a Dark Background* all worked out.

Eventually, in 1989, when *Canal Dreams* came out, I came up from London for the launch party, and went on for a party afterwards in Iain's flat and was drinking

until all hours of the morning. At some point, I found myself sitting down being talked to earnestly by some female friend of Iain's who told me how annoyed Iain was at me having all these books in my head and not writing them, and that I bloody well should write them.

So the following morning as the hangover cleared I decided to do that. But first of all I decided to write some short stories. So I would send short stories off to *Interzone*, and they'd send them back. No wonder, actually, looking at them now. The final nadir of this came when *Interzone* sent back a story and suggested I send it to a small press magazine. So I sent it to our local small press SF magazine, which was called *New Dawn Fades*, and they rejected it. So I thought that there was nothing else for it and that I'd have to write a novel; that I couldn't do short stories.

AAA: I'm sure you would agree that Iain Banks has had an influence on your work, but who else do you feel are the main influences?

KM: Why do people ask these tricky questions? I think one of the major influences is the books that I read when I was a lot younger and inspired ideas for books that I wanted to write. Things like Heinlein's *If This Goes On*, which is the story of a revolutionary cabal in a theocracy. Also very important were John Brunner's novels *Stand on Zanzibar*, *The Jagged Orbit* and *The Sheep Look Up*. Particularly *The Jagged Orbit* which is where I got the idea that a state could be made up of lots of mini-states or enclaves, all of them armed with tactical nuclear weapons and all of them fighting each other. That stuck in my mind for a long time.

The obvious other influence is William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. I certainly found that a terrible inspiring and exciting novel the first time I read it, and the second and third times actually, because it came along at a time when SF had been in the doldrums and had no fresh ideas, and *Neuromancer* was new and fresh. I also read a lot of non-science fiction.

I just worked out that while I was growing up I must have heard the King James' Bible read to me cover to cover at least ten times, and twenty times for the New Testament. That must have had some subconscious effect, learning about one of the basic books of English Literature.

AAA: Well, if you're going to claim influences from on high, you might as well have the highest. Linking into Gibson's influences, one of the main themes of your books is the influence and effects of technology on society. How do you think computers have affected things and how do you think they will affect things in the short term (the long term effects being one of the subjects of your novels of course)?

KM: In the short term, of course, they're all going to crash in eighteen months or so over the Millennium. They've had an immense effect: so immense that it's difficult to grasp. I remember in 1974 or so I asked a friend of mine, Ian Stewart, "What's the latest thing in computers?"

"Microprocessors," he said.

"Micro-what?"

"Very small computers that you can put into anything. In ten years time there'll be computers in washing machines and watches and cars."

"Nah," I thought.

And when I did begin to believe it, I thought "But nobody will have a job!" But of course while there are certainly a lot of people who don't have jobs it doesn't primarily seem to be because of computer technology.

I can't think of anything very original to say about the impact of computers. They've done what computers do: they make it possible to sort an enormous

amount of information. I think the biggest unexpected computer development has been the Internet, which has gone in the past few years from being the preserve of a relative handful of people to something that's constantly part of our culture and becoming one of the major media.

The world had definitely changed when things like "The Starr Report" were released onto the Internet. That was a sign of a big shift, and the Internet in fact has played quite a big part in the whole campaign against Clinton, fortunately or unfortunately, but that's how it worked. The Internet is a constant source of rumours and misinformation and so on. Vernor Vinge was quite right when he talked about "the net of a million lies." You have to have your critical filters set very, very high to deal with the kind of rubbish you get on the Internet.

AAA: Banks, Hamilton, Baxter, yourself. There seems to have been a new strong group of hard SF writers emerging from Britain at the moment. Is there a distinguishing feature, and if so what is it, between British writers and their counterparts from across the pond?

KM: Well, I wouldn't call myself a hard SF writer. I don't know enough physics to write hard SF. All the convincing-sounding physics: wormholes and so on, I made up or have blatantly stolen. The only physics I've tried very hard to get right is the Newtonian physics.

There is a difference between American and British SF which Americans tend to see quite strongly. You get that on the Internet on newsgroups: the view that in Britsh SF it rains all the time, and that we're full of doom and gloom. From the British perspective it doesn't seem that way at all. I don't think anyone over here reading Peter Hamilton's books, for example, or Iain M. Banks, would think that they were full of doom and gloom or pessimism about the future of humanity.

The reason why I think they look different to Americans is that Britain has already conquered the world and lost it, whereas the Americans are still trying to conquer the world, and by extension the Solar System and the galaxy, and they think they can do a better job of it. So, any kind of post-imperialist Science Fiction looks pessimistic to Americans, because it's saying, "You aren't going to win!"

AAA: Where do you go now? You've written three books in what is essentially a future history. Are you going to continue with that future history any further, or are you working on something different? Are you ever going to go back to that universe?

KM: At the moment, I'm working on the fourth volume of the trilogy, which is going to destroy this future history I hope, for good. It's a definitive series-stopper. I've decided to do something which I don't think anyone else has done, which is to have a future history, with an alternative history built into it, although chronologically, it's not really a future history because they can all be read independently, and it would be interesting to see the effect of reading them in a different order, as you come across them. Each book attacks and undermines the others. *The Stone Canal* undermines the credibility of *The Star Fraction* and vice-versa because all the events that look important in *The Star Fraction* appear as urban rumours and myths: suspect, in *The Stone Canal*.

The Cassini Division destroys the rationale of the libertarian politics that has driven the characters of the two other two, and in the next one *The Sky Road*, the rather a-moral perspective on the world seen in all of them, particularly the thing which annoys Iain Banks the most, the utterly casual genocide of Artificial Intelligences, which seems to be a part of the ending of all of these books, gets a stern look.

Which goes back to the first question about the inevitability or otherwise of the socialism of *The Cassini Division* being seen as inevitable. In *The Sky Road*, it isn't and an alternative appears that's rooted in the back-story of *The Stone Canal*. However, it is going to stand completely independently of all the others. It can be your first one if that's what you want to read.

A Little Backfill

Hove, Saturday morning, and I have an hour or so to kill before catching my train. We've got some half-way decent weather in Britain at last and I have gone down to the front to catch the sun. The National Windsurfing Championship is in town, and I could almost be back in California were it not for the fact that the plethora of male musculature on show has neither a perfect tan nor sun-bleached hair. The green sward by the sea front is covered in their vans and trailers. Flags identifying each team flutter above the encampments, giving the scene the look of a mediaeval tournament: proud young warriors about to risk their all for glory.

Tearing my eyes away, I contemplate the wide expanse of sea stretching into the distance. There is no mystery there, of course. Beyond the horizon lies France. People have swum there. Not even the great blue Pacific holds much terror for mankind these days. But there is one great challenge yet to be met and, in this month of the anniversary of the moon landings, it behoves us to have someone like Ken MacLeod to remind us of that little travelled road. It is a journey that, sooner or later, everyone will need to make, even the Greens.

MacLeod, of course, is not thinking sunny south coast. *The Sky Road*, more than any of his previous books, is set in his beloved Scotland. Some of my friends in Melbourne spend much time pontificating about how their work is distinguishable from that of the Americans and British. The signs are there if you look for them, but Australia has so little history, and was invaded by television so early in it, that distinguishing the cultural traits takes some practice.

Macleod has no such problem. *The Sky Road* is unquestionably, undeniably Scottish, from the Celtic fondness for music and dance, through the phenomenal capacity for alcohol that the characters possess to the miasma of cigarette smoke in which all of the action takes place. (If there is one thing that puts me off MacLeod's writing it is that I can almost smell the stale tobacco off the pages). The intimacy with the landscape, be it the majestic glens or the grimy streets of Glasgow, is total. The use of Gaelic is effortless and unforced, far outstripping even the better American Celtophiles such as Patricia Kennealy. And, of course, there is the politics. MacLeod's Socialism is as native to Scotland as Heinlein's Libertarianism is native to America. And, as is usual with Ken, that Socialism is a central element of the book.

The Sky Road has a twin-plotted structure with alternating chapters from two widely separated time streams. The Scottish section takes place well into MacLeod's future history in a Britain ruled by the Greens, descendants of the neo-barbarian terrorists who haunt the fringes of the plot in *The Star Fraction*.

Ken told me back at Easter that the new book had a Green hero, but that isn't strictly true. Clovis colha Gree is not a Green by conviction, he is one by habit and culture, in the same way that mediaeval peasants could be said to be Catholic. Except that he is a historian, and he has this new girlfriend, Merrial, who is a tinker, one who practices the dangerous magical art of programming. As Green society prepares for mankind's first venture into space in many decades, these influences will cause him to learn far more than is perhaps good for him about his culture, and about its heroine, The Great Deliverer who saved the world from Capitalism.

The strangest aspect, to me, of this device was an arrangement of delicate levers, each marked with a letter of the alphabet, queerly ordered:

QWERTYUIOP…

Probably, I thought, a spell

The other half of the book is much closer to home and follows the fortunes of Myra Godwin after the Third World War. Myra is now the effective dictator of a small, purportedly Trotskyist state on the borders of Kazakhstan, but her position seems untenable. On the one hand she is under pressure from the nefarious Dave Reid and his multinational commercial empire. On the other her borders are under threat from the advancing hordes of the Sheenisov who, as readers of *The Cassini Division* will know, eventually come to found a solar-system-wide anarcho-communist empire, the Solar Union (well, they will if this story is part of the same time-line and not a branch off it).

This should give you a good idea of the place of *The Sky Road* in MacLeod's future history. It is, in fact, a direct sequel to *The Star Fraction*. It tells us what The Gun got up to after its part in the British Revolution, and gives us a brief glimpse of how things fell out for Jordan Brown and Cat Duvalier. There is even a brief vignette from a very young Ellen May Ngwethu. From that point of view, the book is aimed squarely at MacLeod's established (and hopefully extensive) regular readership. But it is also a return to the excellent evocation of far left politics: the factionalism, the putsches and coups that made *The Star Fraction* such an entertaining read.

I'm changing trains at Reading and drinking bad cappuccino because railway coffee stores don't know what you mean by mocha. Coffee isn't an ideal drink in the circumstances, but it keeps me awake in the sultry heat and, despite the weather, you have about as much chance of finding a juice bar here as you do of seeing a decent baseball game. This weekend sees the 10th anniversary Womad concert, so the town is full of MacLeod's neo-barbarians. Tribal music, tribal body decoration, tribal politics. There are times when MacLeod's vision of future Britain is startlingly close at hand.

Myra is in New York, desperately seeking help from the UN, or from the rump East American state. Ken sets the negotiations in an Argentine restaurant called Las Malvinas and cheekily places a poster of Lady Thatcher on the wall. My fellow passengers probably think I must be reading Terry Pratchett. The book is full of little details like this, but you have to be British to understand them.

Those of you expecting another in-depth political dialectic will probably be disappointed. There is some debate: MacLeod makes a half-hearted attempt to defend the Green position, but he doesn't do so with much passion. The purpose of

the book is more an exercise in irony, following the career of Myra from Trotskyist revolutionary to mass murdering dictator to heroine of the Green movement that she despised. A strong streak of cynicism runs through the text, exemplified by Merrial's contempt for historical record which, as we later learn, is only too well founded. And yet somehow Myra manages to keep faith. Despite all she has done in the name of practical politics, deep down she still believes. And her last words to the world before enacting The Deliverance just might save as many lives as she has taken. Certainly they ensure that the dream continues, and that one day even the barbarians will aspire to the stars.

There is, along the way, much musing on the role of the individual in history. Perhaps Ken has been reading *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. And then perhaps not because the history of Socialism is littered with far more Significant Persons than would seem appropriate for a supposedly egalitarian philosophy. Longevity, of course, could change everything. Heinlein needed it to reinforce his cult of the individual. As yet MacLeod hasn't seriously addressed the issue, though he has made enough openings to do so and will doubtless get round to it in a later novel.

To sum up, what we have here is another highly entertaining book from one of the most individual and distinctive writers in SF today. A writer too whose command of his craft is visibly growing. MacLeod's books are being published in the US now, and are available, if a little patchily, from Slow Glass in Melbourne. Get hold of them if you can. They are well worth it.

I have just one small complaint: the photo inside the back cover. It really doesn't do Ken justice. Publishers, bah!

The Sky Road - Ken MacLeod - Orbit - hardcover

This review is by Cheryl Morgan and first appeared in issue #47 of *Emerald City* (July 1999).

Interview: Ken talks to Roz Kaveney

RK: You are one of the most political of the current crop of SF writers. Where did you get your present political interests from?

KM: I learned a lot from the American right-wing libertarian SF writers, particularly from Vernor Vinge, who is vastly the best of them, and doesn't lay it on thick. I spent the weekend reading his new book *A Deepness in the Sky*, which is terrific, if you haven't already read it.

RK: I have. The political ideas in the books are an interesting collage of elements from right-wing libertarian and left-wing socialist thought.

KM: That's a useful way of putting it. Since I am not involved in any sort of practical politics these days, I have fun exploring the extreme consequences of ideas. A book that particularly stimulated me was Nozick's *Anarchy, the State and Utopia*, and in a section there, he describes utopia as consisting of a society which is roomy enough to provide people who are different from each other with their own space for utopia.

RK: One law for the tiger and the ox is tyranny, as I think Blake said.

KM: Yes, you could put it like that. The crucial thing for Nozick is that no-one is allowed to violate another person's property rights.

RK: Their property, in the sense of half of Hampshire, or Microsoft, or their property in the sense of their personal stuff?

KM: Definitely their property in the sense of half of Hampshire.

RK: You have worked all sorts of spins on property rights in the four novels.

KM: I like to think that the idea of a company that offers nuclear deterrence as a good in the marketplace is a new spin on anarcho-capitalism, though it is, I suppose, implicit in the books of Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* in particular, where everyone is very polite to everybody else for fear of consequences.

RK: You have a background in Marxism.

KM: I was in the International Marxist Group in the '70s and ended up in a small splinter of the Spartacists and had a bad case of burn-out. And then I was in the Communist Party from 1985-90. I had a naive idea that the different factions there - the Eurocommunists and the Tankies (the authoritarians who believed that the Soviet Union was right to invade Czechoslovakia) - could hold together. And eventually the party disintegrated and I sort of fell out of the middle.

RK: One of the nicer conceits of the books is the idea that much of the future history you portray comes out of a bunch of leftwing students having political arguments in Glasgow in the 1970s.

KM: It was partly convenience, and partly a joke, but also, remember, Lenin and Kerensky, the moderate he replaced, knew each other at high school.

RK: Did you plan a future history sequence from the beginning?

KM: If I had done, I would not have killed off the most attractive and interesting character, Mo Kohn, in the first book *The Star Fraction*.

I started *The Stone Canal* reusing material I had been working on twenty years earlier - the New Mars stuff, with a world that was like Mars ought to have been - and only gradually realised that there were ways of making it tie up. But there were other things going on there too - I had been living in Hayes and that sense of canals and light industry and big soulless plants comes from there. And then I thought of John Wilde's past and realised I could use the Glasgow background.

And even at that point, it never occurred to me that I would use Myra again, put her in a little universe that bubbles off from the rest. I thought that if I used one of the minor characters, it would be her friend Boris, but I realised that I had not enough experience to write a book about someone who spends decades campaigning his way across the Eurasian landmass from Siberia to Lisbon. After that, it was a relief to go back to Myra, and realise that she was a fascinatingly gloomy, romantic character.

RK: Does your interest in writing about the start of things, and their consequences, come from your Marxist period?

KM: I don't think so - I hadn't thought of the two books that move about in time in quite that light, and I didn't plan them that way. In *The Sky Road* I had two stories that I wanted to write, and realized that one way to do it was to have one set of characters looking backwards at someone as a historical figure, and have the original just getting on with things without thinking about a historical role. And in *The Stone Canal* I was just writing about the same person at different stages in a very long life.

RK: Is this it for your future history series?

KM: I certainly don't plan to go back to it for a very long time, if ever. I think that by now I have triangulated in on all the ideas I was interested in - and I have certainly worked the Fourth International to death.

RK: How did you start writing SF?

KM: I sent a story to *New Worlds* way back when - who quite rightly rejected it, and I submitted a few things to *Interzone*, who didn't take them, and then I thought it was time to try and write a novel.

RK: *The Star Fraction* does not feel like a first novel.

KM: I started it in 1987 in my mid-30s, so perhaps by then I had some sense of how things work. And by then I had written my million words of garbage in other forms - documentation for programmes, letters, my thesis.

RK: Yes, you are someone with a real serious science background.

KM: If you can call it that. I wanted to be a scientist, but I was terrible at maths and so I drifted into the least mathematical scientific field, zoology, but then specialised in the most mathematical bit of zoology, bone bio-mechanics. And I was at Brunel, which was a technical college that had come up in the world, and I hated it, which is why in *The Star Fraction* it is shown in a future where it has terrorist attacks every other day. I liked Glasgow a lot more, which is why it is shown as a nice place in *The Stone Canal* and *The Sky Road*.

RK: I am interested in the way in which you often show people who have moved on from earlier ideas still acting inconsistently to salve their consciences. The way that Myra brings care packages of philosophy books to the people she has locked up in her private gulag, for example?

KM: I am not conscious of doing that, but yes, people can change quite a lot and still keep old loyalties.

RK: Maybe it is a way of continuing to be the person you once were.

KM: I am not sure. In my books, people who have long lives end up stretched a little thin through being too many things across time. Look at Myra for example.

RK: I don't know - she ends up leading a horde, with a banner. What could be more poster Bolshevik? Do you see identity as a matter of a continuing process, or a solid nugget?

KM: Definitely as a spark that starts when you are born and continues until you finally die.

RK: Which, I suppose, is one of the reasons why you are so suspicious of the idea of downloading and uploading human intelligence into computers? And why you are quite iffy about Artificial Intelligence?

KM: I get into terrible rows about this on the web. In the books, I take quite a strong AI position, which gives the books huge chunks of plot, but I am not at all convinced of that position in real life, though I am fascinated by Daniel Dennett's ideas. And there are other ideas I have drawn on - I don't believe in the idea that we are modular beings and so I wrote my robot character, Dee in *The Stone Canal* as one to show the difference. Which is not to say that there are not times when we all access different bits of ourselves, and can be fully present in emergencies.

RK: You show AIs as having different agendas from human beings.

KM: I had been reading extropians like Hans Moravec and found the whole thing disturbingly anti-humanist. I prefer to see AI in the way that Vinge does in *A Fire Upon the Deep*, as a Blight. Post-humans and AIs would be inherently untrustworthy. We would see them as our children, and they would see us as bugs. Dealing with them would be a game of prisoner's dilemma, and you could not afford to get it wrong because there would only be one or two interactions - so you would have to retaliate the moment they betrayed you. Elena, in *The Cassini Division*, has

absolutely no mental reservations about this, which is why I like her.

RK: And the other aspect of downloading is that people become commodities.

KM: I suppose it is an extreme form of alienation, to find yourself resurrected in a worker drone in the rings of Saturn. But in spite of that, those characters could be worse off - they are free inside their minds, not complete slaves. One of the terrifying things about Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky* is the way that people are edited, with a virus, into a sort of purposeful autism.

RK: Are utopia and dystopia off your agenda now?

KM: I find the ideas of utopia and dystopia rather suspect - things aren't like that. There are no real utopias, or dystopias, in my work, just strains working in both directions. But I have had fun with the utopian tradition - in *The Cassini Division*, I use the old utopian trope of someone being given a tour, only Suze is showing Elena the non cooperative, less utopian bit of her society, and of course the ruralized London is my little bit of homage to William Morris.

RK: I can't help noticing that feminism is distinctly absent from your futures as an ideology.

KM: Very much so - specifically a forgotten idea. And yet there is no sexual division of labour in these worlds and a sexual egalitarianism that everyone takes for granted.

RK: Is it a matter of equal access to economic resources for you then?

KM: Just one of those things that capitalism is capable of delivering if you let it run long enough, a way of getting restrictions and monopolies out of the way.

RK: A lot of socialist dystopias assumed that capitalism would turn into what Jack London called the Iron Heel.

KM: But what they did not understand is that monopoly, not socialism, is the real foe of the free market and humanity. If there is an Iron Heel in my books, it is the USUN, the New World Order, and the desire to stop people developing their own ideas and cultures.

RK: There are not many villains in your books.

KM: There are, but they are off-stage because I am not interested in them. I can imagine doing terrible things - you can become indifferent, and even do things face to face and hand to hand. But you end up like Stalin, and let's face it, he didn't have a lot of fun.

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Footnote

Ken MacLeod's latest novel, *The Sky Road*, was recently awarded the British Science Fiction Association Award. It was also a runner up for this year's Arthur C. Clark Award.