

**Ian Watson Lecture. 27th Miquel Barceló UPC Science Fiction Award ceremony
(17/09/2025)**

'I have no idea'

I have no idea what any other writer — honoured with my present *and pleasant* task — has said in the past.

Present and pleasant. Already you may notice that I am strongly affected as regards the meaning of the words I choose by similarities, by echoes, parallels, puns. It is no accident that my first published science fiction novel *The Embedding (Incrustados)* owes a lot to the eccentric French author Raymond Roussel who based his fiction upon conjuring tricks with language. Roussel would start with a string of words such as "Napoleon the first Emperor..." "Napóleon premier Empereur..." and end with words which sound exactly the same but have a totally different meaning. The story is a journey from one meaning to the other by way of surrealist objects and adventures. My novel *The Embedding* was translated into Spanish originally with the title *Empotrados*. I became tired of seeing giant advertisements for "Armarios empotrados". A new Spanish edition demanded a new title, *Incrustados*.

Beware that I am an "unreliable narrator" because I adopt personae, personajes, rather in the way that Fernando Pessoa did. Pessoa's name itself means "Person", so being a poet Pessoa was doomed to behave this way. Myself, I am paid not to imitate life but to tell lies.

What is a "Wat-son"? By addressing this question I hope to explore with a light heart, *non-tragically*, why and how I write — mostly science fiction in my case, also some fantasy and horror— to see if there's any useful key for other people.

In the past the English word "alienist" was the name for what is now called a psychiatrist. People with mental problems were said to be "alienated" from themselves. Such people were not integrated inside themselves, nor integrated with other people.

I myself developed an early interest in *aliens*, from outer space. Nowadays I realise that my upbringing was a bit unusual. I was an only child, so I have no concept of brothers or sisters. I had exactly one cousin. Cousin Pamela. For a long time I thought her first name was 'Cousin'. My parents kept to themselves, in a bungalow on the outskirts of town. To begin with there was a clear view across fields, but population multiplied and builders came to cover everything which was previously visible. My parents never went out, to meet friends nor share a meal. Therefore I did not develop much sense of other people as presences of significance. My father worked in a major post

office, on the other side of the river quite far from our home. Every weekday he drove his car to the post office, including crossing a busy wide river by ferry. Every noon he drove back home for a lunch cooked by my mother, then he returned to work again including yet another ferry across the River Tyne. This is a *lot* of to and fro. He never spoke about his job nor his happiness nor otherwise in my hearing. My father ended up in charge of that big post office, but he never mixed socially with the many members of staff, nor had a beer with any of them. In fact he never had a beer. He was never "one of the boys," as the saying goes. He ignored football and rugby and cricket both on the radio or in our local area. I had no idea what he wanted in life, apart from lots of extra salt on all his meals before even tasting the food. My mother did have a literary ambition and once sent a short story to a publication called *The Velvet Magazine*, aimed at ladies of the 1920s. She treasured the standard rejection letter as though it was an acceptance—they had communicated with her. Later she discovered excitingly that my father had been at school in the same class as a girl from the humble back streets of South Shields, who blossomed into a best-selling famous popular novelist, Catherine Cookson, previously Katie MacMullen. My mother ventured to send a fan letter, and this turned out to be fulfilling.

As a family of three, we did go on holiday each year. Holiday was a tent in the wilds of Wales, or a rented caravan alone in a field overlooking a lake where the poet Wordsworth may have done senderismo, or a tiny cottage on a remote Scottish island.

My parents were secretive. Nobody knew that my father had a lively, naughty sister who ran off to London to have fun before the Second World War—from which she emerged as mistress to a black marketeer estraperlista with a grand mansion on the river Thames, a motor launch, a chain of bakeries. We did visit "Auntie" for holidays at the mansion, but always the cover story was that my mother was visiting "an old friend". An unrespectable uncle, who had been a drunken sailor, would visit us once a year for an awkward dinner, but otherwise the old man did not exist.

As a child all this seemed completely normal to me due to lack of any other background. Books taught me how other people behave. Books such as Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*. Soon I had a newly-built room of my own to be alone in and read hungrily, including science fiction as soon as I realised that science fiction existed.

At school I achieved my own small selection of friends. Life seemed quite boring and mundane, except for whatever I read on my own alone. I remember when I was 11 years old or so taking a bus to the big city of Newcastle 10 miles away to attend a lecture at the large natural history museum about the birds of Iceland, illustrated by amateur photo slides. I was not interested in birds nor in amateur photography. But I loved the idea of empty Iceland with nobody else in sight. Recently "autism" has become fashionable as a label for non-typical ways of thinking and behaving

which *by itself* confers value and validation. I deny autism to explain myself to myself. I do note that the words 'author' and 'autism' are similar.

Cacti on sale were very rare during the 1950s in the UK, but I found some and while I was a schoolboy I earned my first ever payments from writing by selling articles about cacti to nation-wide gardening magazines. Here are my actual roots as an author! Cacti seemed to me the vegetation of an alien planet, which was a good thing. Ten shillings per article, a small fortune, now only 50 centimos. Incidentally, when I started to sell science fiction stories I would earn enough money from a story to live for two weeks. After 40 or 50 years the payment hasn't really changed much, but now I can only live for 2 hours. *Nevertheless*, notwithstanding, short stories are the jewels of imaginative fiction, more valuable as art than the majority of novels. Authors, turn off your word count! Stop obsessing with length. Quit boasting of your climbing word count on social media. Instead, rewrite afresh ten or twenty times, with the same total length but *much shorter*.

However, I confess that for a few years after *The Embedding* appeared I imagined that I would mainly write novels, and that my lifetime's basket of stories could probably be listed on one sheet of paper. This did not happen at all! The career of a writer is full of contradictions and paradoxes. That is a problem about giving advice.

I had little sense of attachment to my region, Tyneside in the county of Northumberland — except to the extent that there was a lot of lonely landscape to visit by car on a Sunday for a picnic.

Bizarrely nowadays I live in Asturias in Gijón, which in many ways mirrors the town of Tynemouth where I grew up in the north of England. There is the same curved sandy beach which the Vikings invaded about 840 AD. Nearby coal mines. Roman ruins. And tourist attractions. That's Gijon. But this was all *prefigured* by the Tynemouth area of my boyhood 70 years ago. Near Tynemouth was a permanent seaside funfair built about 1908 named The Spanish City, decorated throughout to look exotically like Spain of fiestas and flamenco. The tourists whom it attracted in masses every Summer were all working class Scottish families from Glasgow.

The mouth of our river Tyne was defended by *The Spanish Battery*, armed with cannons, a fort originally manned by Spanish mercenaries paid by King Henry the Eighth.

Half way along the bend of the Long Sands (very like Gijón's main beach) was a magnificent entertainment palace known as *The Plaza* which began life in the late 19th Century as 'Tynemouth Palace'. Most locals were sure that the Spanish word for 'palace' is 'plaza'. What else could the name possibly mean?

Little did I know how Spain would repeat itself by coincidence in my future!

The people of Tyneside were gloomy. On a walk I was warned about a breezy beach, "It's treacherous down there!" [With the local accent: REPEAT.] If I said something unusual I would be told, "You're flying too high. You'll bring about the downfall of nations!" [REPEAT WITH ACCENT.] "Treacherous" was London and the whole South, England from the waistline downwards.

My parents sent me expensively (for them) to a local fee-paying boys day school. This was to avoid rough proletarians, and also avoid all girls, and to equip me with some Latin and Greek. Because my school was a bit chaotic and I was always the youngest in class with an age span of four years I managed to leave school two years early with a training in drinking beer bought for me by older-looking friends and also with a scholarship to an Oxford college, which I myself had sought out on my own. My friendly history teacher advised me not to fly so high.

But I flew away. Farewell forever to the North of England, never emotionally my home. Oxford was now my paradise. While a student I did write a few short novels about solitary mad people, and one was almost published by the avant-garde UK publisher of Samuel Beckett and of French "new novel" authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet. My almost-published short novel was about a young woman coping with pregnancy. I wasn't a young woman and I had no experience of pregnancy, but I was believable medically and psychologically. Due to no family nor homeland allegiances, I can be a chameleon.

As a first-year student I joined an informal trip to Paris during the first Easter vacation. I remember going to second-hand bookshops and those bookstalls alongside the river, asking for cheap French science fiction. Back then SF books were known as Livres d'Anticipation, Books of Anticipation. I was at least a decade too late to visit the nearby Deux Magots café to spy upon Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and other famous intellectuals, so I wasn't really wasting my time on a wild goose chase. The geese *did exist*; I just failed to find any. Of course I bought *Tropic of Cancer* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, banned in England. And the *Kama Sutra*.

It may be unhelpful to recommend my own happy "alienation" as a route for a would-be writer of SF, Fantasy, or Horror to follow. My own route was more in line with Rimbaud declaring "Je suis un autre" "I am An Other", or James Joyce proclaiming the secret of his success to be "exile, silence, and cunning"—which Joyce himself never actually said nor wrote. This does locate me within a certain intellectual tradition, more European than Anglo-American, and maybe more literary than "sci-fi". However, these days history is swiftly forgotten and the wheel re-invented. So instead of

recommending would-be authors of fantastic literature to cultivate the new I advise them to *revive the old*. And *only then* to be original. *Don't aim to be original on the basis of the new*.

While I was reading Émile Zola avidly as "literature" I had lurid SF author A.E. Van Vogt hidden behind my back. Surely somebody with an alien name like Van Vogt, instead of dull 'Watson', must possess alien wisdom! In France Van Vogt was translated by surrealist superstar Boris Vian and was hailed as a visionary intellectual. Back in England, no such luck. The British literary establishment is persistently snobbishly ignorant about science fiction.

I might mention here that in my view Zola's Rougon-Macquart novels are a major science fiction project, the science in question being genetics—not fully understood back then when they were written.

I strongly defend not understanding things fully, such as, say, the universe. Undoubtedly we'll never have a full understanding. Dark Matter will disappear just like the luminiferous ether before it. Being up to date is simultaneously a good idea and a bad idea. In case you think I'm just being perversely naughty denying Dark Matter, in Geneva a couple of years ago the CERN superscientist Jeffrey Hangst confided to me *sotto voce* while we sat waiting for a pizza that he won't be surprised if Dark Matter turns out to be a delusion. It is Hangst who designed and built at supercost the experiment to see whether antimatter obeys gravity, or not. In CERN's "Antimatter Factory" laboratory Hangst accumulated a mighty store of anti-hydrogen — at least several millions of a gram — to see what happens when you throw these anti-atoms into a vessel containing nothing but vacuum. Yes, antimatter does obey gravity, not antigravity. Now we know. I respect this.

My first published SF novel was partly set in Brazil, and my third published SF novel partly in Bolivia. To this day I have never visited South America, but it seems I was plausible enough to convince readers and critics, even readers today. I joked that if you cannot invent an existing country on your own planet, what value has your writing about an alien world! Back then there was no internet, no Wikipedia, no cheap travel, no tourist guidebooks to help an author. Even in Oxford with its libraries and bookshops there was next to nothing about the Quechua- and Aymara-speaking people of the Andes. I remember a very short vocabulary of Quechua compiled by missionaries, in the Bodleian. Therefore I had to envision and imagine, based on just a few clues. Nowadays I would be an idiot to do this. Back then I was seeking to express the alien within my own planet. My sort of "originality challenge" is missing from a wired-up world.

At this point I must launch a fierce attack [WOOF! WOOF!] upon so-called AI as any kind of assistance to creative authors. I will pass over the matter of massive theft of texts to train software. I will not mention (much) the huge outpouring of stupidly generated costly energy which adds a big

straw to the camel's back of climate catastrophe now already fast arriving. But so-called 'AI' — which lacks any 'intelligence' as experienced, say, by a rat — is increasingly manifesting "hallucinations", false combinations of nonsense which then become part of the infosphere to be sampled and recombined. Bye-bye, before long, to the knowledge-utopia of the internet, poisoned by evil greedy fools. Bye-bye to any historic quotation or set of facts that you might hope to google as being correct.

My other fierce attack is upon the use by authors of books and of visual media of agony as a hook to entertain us. Pain Porn. Back in 1987 — nearly *forty years ago* — I published an essay in *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction* — entitled "The Author as Torturer". Gene Wolfe's *Shadow of the Torturer* lacks sadism — substituting sophistication instead — yet the title does exploit a certain, shall we say, thrill or *frisson* of cruelty. Back then Alfred Bester in his declining years and John Varley were deliberately writing torture as spice to stimulate their readers.

1890s decadent poet Ernest Dowson wrote, "I cried for madder music and for stronger wine." Importantly Horror Master Clive Barker himself declared that he would never write anything that is *repeatable*. Something that some sick-minded reader might imitate in reality, for instance, upon a prisoner. Yet always the demand for pain porn stimulation grows more extreme and more realistic. Pain porn is routinely put into books and movies as a hook for the consumer. This diminishes civilisation and humanity and art.

But what about some of my own works, where millions die bloodily? I refer to my 4 Warhammer Forty Thousand novels. The 40K universe is grotesque, baroque, over-the-top—but it *cannot* be real no more than a Tyrannid, the 40K alien creature, can be real. Warhammer 40K deeply appealed to my early liking for 'space opera' — which 40K enabled me to write, hallucinating right after breakfast then emerging from psychosis in time for lunch. Never repeatable in the real world, though! In the case of Warhammer 40K I found writing for hire to be liberating, which is why I signed my Games Workshop novels with my own name rather than putting on the masks of pen-names which the other first writers all did.

In the real world, will humans ever travel to any of the stars?

Those stars were much closer in 1970, 50 years ago. Actually, 50 years ago, where there are approximately 3 humans alive nowadays, then there was only one. Some of you may remember how different the world felt. At the age of 13 I went on a school trip to Rome. Each morning after breakfast the teachers told us to go out for the day to explore — without any adult supervision — and to be back by 6 pm for dinner. On my own I climbed up on to the roof of St Peter's to look at the view. Try to do that nowadays! Being thirsty, I went into a café, where the person in front of me

ordered a Cinzano. So I repeated exactly the same words, and I was served the same. I enjoyed this drink! In my next café, likewise. And so onward, around Rome. Chin-chin.

In the past there were fewer products to buy, but there was more world and more space. As SF writers we didn't have limits, thanks to ignorance. What does the planet Pluto look like close up? Nobody could even have half-guessed! Today's SF authors have much more information about a very much vaster cosmos but I'd say that its true rules are restrictive, billions of uninhabitable lifeless worlds and persistent inexplicability. I suspect that it's simpler and easier for there to be something rather than nothing, although this sentence is doubtless nonsense.

Give free rein to the imagination!

¡Deja volar la imaginación!

Deixa anar la imaginació

And if the resulting science fiction is surreal, hooray!

Thank you for your attention!

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