

BOOK CLUB NOTES

Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait K.A. Bedford

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About the author

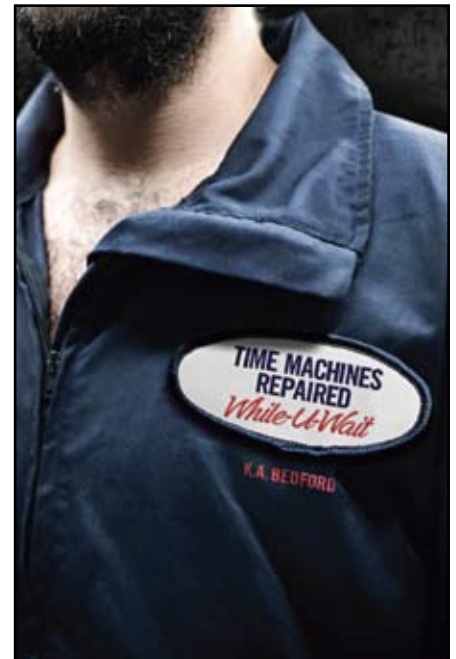
K.A. (Adrian) Bedford has been writing since he was a little kid, but started writing seriously when he was 14. His first novel, which was his first professional sale, was published in 2003, when he was 40. The lesson here, he says, is “stick with it.” K.A. Bedford attended Curtin and Murdoch Universities, where he studied Writing, Theatre and Philosophy.

Adrian has published three previous novels in North America, *Orbital Burn* (2003), *Eclipse* (2005) and *Hydrogen Steel* (2006), as well as a North American edition of *Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait* (2008). Each of his novels has been either shortlisted for or won an Aurealis Award. This year he is planning to start a fresh burst of study through Open Universities Australia, focussing again on Philosophy. He lives in the wild northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia with his wife Michelle.

K.A. Bedford describes his novel

Aloysius ‘Spider’ Webb works as a time machine repairman. He lives in a near-future era where time travel, and time machines, are extraordinarily popular, and relatively cheap. They’re ubiquitous; but they are also prone to break down for various reasons, and when they do, they can either take them to the time machine dealer they bought it from, or go to a third-party outfit like Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait.

One day, Spider finds a dead woman in a broken time machine. This sets the plot in motion. An ex-police detective, Spider becomes obsessed with finding out who she is, and what happened to her. Only there is no case to solve, because the government department that regulates time travel sweeps in and confiscates all the evidence. But Spider is dogged and can’t leave the matter alone.



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Ultimately, he figures out what has happened to her, but this knowledge is a dangerous thing

The book is a detective story. There are clues, leads, red herrings, murky goings on, intrigue, plots within plots, powerful interests, and so forth.

However, it's also a science fiction story: it poses the classic "what-if" question. What if time travel were normal, and anybody could tool about backwards and forwards in time? What would that do to the world? What would reality be like? And, the key question: who would absolutely hate it, and suffer because of it?

Answer: my hero, Spider, stuck with having to clean up other people's messes, fixing machines for people who have no clue what to do with them, who don't read the instructions, and who get into all kinds of stupid trouble, and expect someone else to fix it.

K.A. Bedford on what inspired him to write the novel

There were a few key moments leading up to the main idea itself: I read, just for fun, a novel by Philip K. Dick, called *Martian Time-Slip*. Published in 1964, it's about a future in which Mars has been settled and is being turned into typical suburbia. People move out to Mars, and go about their lives the way they used to go about them back on Earth. But there's weird stuff as well. Indigenous Martians with spooky time-bending capabilities play a part in the plot. Thing is, the main character of the book is a working-class guy who works as a robot repairman. He has a pretty ordinary sort of life, a complicated family, overbearing inlaws, an unfaithful wife, and all the rest. And he fixes robots. I liked the ordinariness of that, set in a strange world.

I also read a short story called 'Bicycle Repairman' by American author Bruce Sterling, about a near-future world where this guy works as a, well, repairman of bicycles. There's all kinds of other shenanigans going on in the piece, but the key is that he fixes these things. I liked that. I liked the idea of a story where, instead of being the great intrepid hero going about doing great deeds, he's cleaning up the hero's messes, fixing up the hero's broken stuff. For a while my story was going to be called, 'Time Machine Repairman', as a sort of homage to the Bruce Sterling story.

In any case, I've always liked time travel stories, and have read loads of them. The thing is, there's only ever one time machine in these stories. Or if there's more than one they're all under the control of some kind of Time Police, and ordinary people don't get to use them much. I started to think: what if time machines were everywhere? What if everyone had one? What if you could buy them the way you'd buy a car? Who would fix them when they break down? Add in the fact that my dad used to fix car and boat engines (so I knew a fair amount of what a motor mechanic's life was like) and I just about had my story.

And then something wonderful happened ...

I thought: what if a guy who fixes time machines one day discovers a dead body in one of these machines? There's nothing like a murder to add immediate interest to a story, and it

also gives you a shape to work from. I loved it. And I loved it even more when I thought that the repair guy who finds the body used to be a police detective, but left the police under a bit of a cloud, and is bitter and angry about it.

This led to the best feeling of all, the “ooooh!” you get when something good clicks into place. Writing the book, though, was hard work. My first problem was this: if everybody in the world has a time machine, including the police, finding the murderer who killed the woman becomes an elementary problem. You just scroll back through time to when the person was killed, and there’s the killer! You can clear up the whole case in about half an hour, including time off for lunch. There’s no story. So I had to stop and think about what might cause problems for the investigators in a world of ubiquitous time travel. Eventually, I realised that the thing to do would be to have the federal government sweep in and confiscate everything, and seal off the period in which the murder happened, so that nobody could go near the event itself to see what happened.

This gave me what I needed. But I still needed to figure out a huge amount of stuff about what the world might be like, and this took months and months before I even started writing the story.

Once I started writing the story (which took several months again) I was interrupted frequently for the writing of more notes to clear up problems that had emerged in the course of the story. It was a huge challenge. And then, once I’d finished and submitted the manuscript to my publisher in Canada, I heard back: the publisher had pointed out numerous areas in which the manuscript needed a lot of work, including areas where the story actually didn’t make sense. All of that had to be rewritten. In the end I rewrote most of the second half of the book, in a very short time.

K.A. Bedford on science fiction writing

Science fiction is a body of literature dating back over one hundred years. Among the first science fiction works are H.G. Wells’ novel, *The Time Machine*, though there are far earlier examples of “travelling in time” in works of literature. Mark Twain’s ‘*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*’ features a guy who travels back in time via mysterious means and winds up, as the title suggests, in Camelot. Hijinks ensue.

Science fiction is a literature of ideas, of speculation about how things in the world might be different, if one or two things about our world, or indeed, our universe, were different — and how human beings might or might not respond or adapt to these changes.

People who aren’t in the know about science fiction tend to get caught up in the gadgetry and whizziness of the science part of the name, but it’s important to realise that science fiction is fiction first and foremost. It’s about exploring human nature in unusual circumstances. It is not about predicting the future, which is the most common misconception people have about science fiction. It sets out to explore different ideas and possibilities, but at no point does it set out to make predictions. For example, in my novel *Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait*, there is the idea that in about twenty years we’ll

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have time machines, that they'll be widely available, and everyone will have one. I'm not seriously predicting that this is going to happen, or even likely to happen. (In the real world, time travel is technically possible, but it is enormously difficult, and current theory suggests that there would be extremely serious limits on what a time traveller could do, even if she could get the machine to work.)

It is widely thought that science fiction is all about spaceships, aliens, remote planets, the distant future, and even, to borrow from Canadian author Margaret Atwood's thoughts on the subject, "full of talking squids in outer space". Atwood continues to insist that she does not write science fiction. She writes books about genetic engineering, about climate catastrophes, and all manner of extremely speculative ideas - which, to those of us in the science fiction community, mark her work as genuine sf. She doesn't believe it, and won't be told otherwise.

Cormac McCarthy wrote a novel called *The Road*, about a father and son walking through a world where some terrible catastrophe has occurred. This book is held up as literature. We in the sf community identify it as science fiction, because the post-apocalyptic theme is right up our street. It's a what-if scenario: what if the world ended catastrophically? This theme is one of the most prominent in science fiction, probably stemming from many authors living through the Cold War, ecological crises, political anxiety, and other real-world disasters apparently just waiting to happen. What would happen if one or more of these came true? What would the world be like after a nuclear war? What if all but a few people died? What if there were alien lifeforms out there, and they came here? I could go on and on with these examples. Science fiction is a fertile field. Hundreds, even thousands, of new, original science fiction novels are published annually, some of them by authors who insist they are not committing actual science fiction, but who really are. It is the genre that, sometimes, dares not speak its name.

It was good enough for Nobel laureate Doris Lessing, who wrote several works of science fiction, and reports that she's very proud of them, and wishes reporters would ask her about them more. But some authors are embarrassed about science fiction.

It's true that the field comes from humble roots. There used to be a wealth of magazines printed on pulp paper, in which all manner of lurid, sensational, and often not very good stories of colourful aliens, amazing spaceships, wars with aliens, and, yes, bug-eyed monsters having sex with scantily-clad ladies featured. Believe it or not, some of these stories are still great fun to read.

The critics of science fiction, and those who continue to insist that their excellent works of science fiction are really just "literature that happens to take place in an imagined future setting" believe that the field today is still like it was in the 1950s and '60s. They think science fiction is the sort of thing you often see dished up in TV shows and popular movies. It's true that these are considered sf, but there is much more to the field, too much to describe in this short space. If you've ever wondered what the world would be like if there were no men, or no women; if you've ever wondered what it would be like to live on other planets; if you've ever wondered what it would be like if you went back in time and met Jesus Christ as he was being crucified; then science fiction is for you. It's fun, and

thought-provoking. It might even make you see yourself, and the world, very differently.

As for combining crime and sf themes in one story: this is an old trick, dating back at least to Isaac Asimov, one of the legends of the sf field, and a giant in the world of books generally. He wrote a lot of science fiction-crime novels and short stories. It was from this work of his that I got interested in the idea of combining the two genres.

It's fairly easy to do. For a crime or detective story, you need sinister goings-on. A murder is a great start. Who did it? Who is the victim? How do we find the killer? These are all standard police procedural/detective story notions. Then you add a science fictional idea: what if time travel was not only possible but widespread and incredibly commonplace? Next you put the two ideas together: the detective story gives you the basic framework, in which you need a detective or sleuth, you need witnesses, suspects, and of course you need to know what actually happened. Your detective character can work through a number of ideas, leads and theories about what happened, and you resolve it all at the end. Into this framework you inject your sf idea. For example, Asimov wrote about a world where robots were common, and extremely intelligent, but non-threatening to humans. But a murder occurs, and the robots are suspects. Could they have done it?

More generally, though, science fiction is about scientific speculation at some level. And science relies on the "scientific method" in order to turn observations and ideas into hypotheses, theories, experiments, and hopefully, an explanation of what's really going on in the world. It is investigation itself that makes science fiction and crime fiction work so well together: in both types of fiction something has happened and characters are trying to figure out exactly what it was, and what to do about it. Science fiction is often about exploring the unknown, trying to figure out mysteries large and small. And likewise in detective or crime fiction, there are mysteries to solve. It makes sense to combine the two. Crime fiction is still published in pulp magazines as well as in novels, just like science fiction has always been. In some ways the two genres are two sides of the same coin.

Discussion questions

1. Would the world be a better place if people could time travel?
2. Should the federal government be allowed to regulate what people can and can't do with time machines? For instance, should you be allowed to go back and try to save Jesus Christ? Or kill Hitler?
3. Is the time travel in this book about these 'big' questions (and universe devouring Vores are pretty big!) or is the underlying philosophy about the differences which the individual can make in his or her day to day actions? You might want to take, as examples, the marriages of Spider and Molly, and James Rutherford.
4. What do you make of Spider's final thought in the book, where he's bitter and upset and thinks that the Vores couldn't get to this time fast enough (presumably to destroy this reality, and him)?

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5. Should Molly have been killed off? (I've had lots of people tell me I totally should have killed the annoying cow, but I didn't agree.)
6. Is Dickhead crazy, or inspired? What parallels can you find in Dickhead in actual historic figures? What is the nature of his charisma?
7. What do you think of Spider's claim that free will is an illusion? Is it?
8. In the book's universe, going back in time to try to change things often results in the same outcomes – it appears that some things “want” to happen. Is there fate or destiny in this universe? Should it be possible to change the past? What happens to personal responsibility if you can keep bad things from happening to yourself or others?
9. In the book, it turns out that most people, once they get a time machine, only want to visit the past. Nobody much wants to go to the future. Why?
10. Where would you go, given the chance? What would you like to see, or be part of?