Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman

Future Politics: An Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson

The world is nearly all parcelled out, and what there is left of it is being divided up, conquered, and colonized. To think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.—Cecil Rhodes (1902)

Kim Stanley Robinson was one of the featured speakers at “The Futures of Utopia” conference held at Duke University in 2003. The conference celebrated the work of the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson—or rather, since Jameson himself was adamant that the event be more than a mere homage, it featured papers addressing a persistent Jamesonian theme: the political role of utopian thought and fiction. As one of the great utopian and speculative writers of the age, Robinson was a key presence at a conference otherwise populated almost entirely by students and academics.

On the second evening of the conference, Robinson held the audience transfixed with an hour of readings and reminiscences about his career and the major themes in his work, opening with a humorous story about his experience as a student of Jameson’s at the University of California–San Diego in the early 1970s. The conference as a whole began with a provocative lecture by Jameson himself on “The Politics of Utopia,” in which he brought together his hitherto scattered speculations on utopia into what was arguably his clearest articulation of the politics of the concept. In this lecture, published in New Left Review (January/February 2004: 35-54), Jameson makes the claim that “utopia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political” (43). The lecture seeks to identify the conditions of possibility of utopia, and finds that the utopian impulse—that which “allows us to take hitherto unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seems on the cards” (45)—emerges when the political is severed from lived experience and daily life. In a sense, Jameson’s claim is that utopias are symptomatic expressions of a desire not for a future politics, but for a return of the political to a contemporary moment from which it has all but been evacuated. In the context of the conference, Robinson had little time or opportunity to respond to these claims about utopia. But the conjunction of Jameson and Robinson, each a long-time advocate and fan of the other, led us to wonder what a writer long associated with utopian thinking might have to say about the fate of utopian writing today. And this led us to other questions and queries about both his recent novels and his views of the groundbreaking Mars trilogy a decade after the publication of the first volume, Red Mars (1993).

Kim Stanley Robinson is regarded as one of the finest science-fiction writers alive today, although it would be more appropriate, especially with respect to the political import of his work, to describe him as one of the finest writers
period (in our view, "science fiction" should be treated as an honorific rather than as the qualifier that many still take it to be). He is the author of numerous novels and of a study of Philip K. Dick (The Novels of Philip K. Dick [1984], originally KRS’s PhD dissertation supervised by Jameson), editor of several collections of short stories, and also author of acclaimed short stories, novellas, and novelettes (he was nominated seventeen times for Hugo and Nebula awards in these categories, winning the 1987 Nebula for Best Novella for The Blind Geometer). His novels include The Wild Shore (1984), The Gold Coast (1988), and Pacific Edge (1990), which together make up the ORANGE COUNTY trilogy; the award-winning MARS trilogy: Red Mars (Nebula), Green Mars (1994, Hugo), and Blue Mars (1996, Hugo); and many others, including Antarctica (1998), which emerged out of time Robinson spent in the Southern polar regions, and his ground-breaking alternative history, The Years of Rice and Salt (2002). Forty Signs of Rain, which will be published in 2004, inaugurates a new trilogy that explores the problematic intersections of big science, politics, and the fate of the environment; the second book in the trilogy in tentatively titled Science in the Capital.

Further information about Robinson can be located on-line at the unofficial KSR website <www.KimStanleyRobinson.net>. Robinson lives in Davis, California. This interview was conducted by e-mail in January and February 2004.

Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman: Just out of curiosity, what do you think of President Bush’s announcement that the United States will pursue the establishment of a permanent moon base followed by a manned mission to Mars? Does Mars constitute a genuine object of investigation, or is it being used by the current Administration for its own political purposes? When the Bush Administration requested $87 billion to fund the war and reconstruction efforts in Iraq, a number of commentators came forward with suggestions for other, better social uses for this huge sum. One can only imagine what could be done with the trillions (!) of dollars that the new space program will consume —though where this money is coming from given the vast, crippling deficits projected for the foreseeable future in the US is anybody’s guess.

Kim Stanley Robinson: The Bush proposal was not really serious, in that the sizeable budget required was not spelled out, nor was the timetable. Nothing the Bush team does is in good faith with the country or the world. However, that being said, the proposed reorganization of NASA, with the goals of a Moon station and a Mars station later, will be helpful in setting priorities. In a scientific sense they are good goals, I think, and should be pursued. Trying to think about space exploration from a green-left perspective has always been a challenge to me, but I think the way to do it is to imagine the military-industrial complex re-focused on something peaceful and useful. Obviously the 450 billion dollars a year that the USA now spends on war capability (more for the wars themselves) should not all be devoted to space, but if we ever begin the long process of demilitarization, peaceful aerospace projects would be one way to give these massive industries something good to do, thus helping to avoid some
giant economic crash. Then along with this pragmatic reason, what we learn from Mars may come in very useful when we have to tackle the problem of our inadvertent terraforming of Earth, already begun by accident. Comparative planetology is a powerful tool of understanding (the hole in the ozone layer was discovered by means of it) and so going to Mars has that high value too.

IS/MW: Can you tell us about your new book, Forty Signs of Rain, which is set in the hothouse of Washington politics—politics that are played out at the intersections of money, science, and the environment? For those familiar with your writing mostly through the Mars trilogy, a seemingly straight-ahead political novel might seem out of character. And yet the setting for Forty Signs of Rain sounds familiar: the sweaty, globally-warmed-over DC where Antarctica’s Wade Norton makes his home. What issues are you hoping to address in this novel?

KSR: The novel shares some characters with my earlier novel, Antarctica. It is a kind of near-future sf, similar in some ways to my California books, and so not a great departure for me. I’ve been able to spend some time at the National Science Foundation, and it struck me as an interesting environment for an sf novel. The global warming stuff seems worthy of depiction in a novel, and I’ve been interested for years in finding stories that would explore the money/science/politics/environment complex of issues, so here’s another good opportunity. Also, I lived in Washington DC for four years, and I wanted to describe that a bit, as a kind of dystopic landscape (at least for me).

IS/MW: In The Years of Rice and Salt you offer an incredible alternative history of the world, one in which Europeans have been wiped out by the Black Plague, and the world is left with four or five major civilizations (and religions) whose conflicts and coalitions produce the future. One of the effects of this structure is that you are able to offer readers extended encounters with religious beliefs and social practices with which many North Americans are likely to be unfamiliar, from the social character of Buddhism to the culture of the Islamic madressa. What are some of the issues and themes that you wanted to explore in this novel, especially with respect to religion and belief?

KSR: Ah well, a big question. I had the idea for this alternative history many years ago, and simply following the trend of the story as it seemed to me, I got led into the opportunity to explore interests that I had in China and in Buddhism. It was one of those nice projects in which I felt I could follow any strand of interest that occurred to me, and so I did. Eastern religions, theories of history, various places in Asia and Europe, all were part of the pattern in this project. All were part of the solution to the problem of how to make this idea into a novel. It was the novel itself that remained my foremost interest here, not any particular thematic strand in it—how to make it all work as a novel that readers would respond to.

IS/MW: After September 11, The Years of Rice and Salt seems prescient. Where did the idea for the novel come from? What issues were you responding to in the years before 9/11 that led to a novel that, in its aftermath, seems like such a productive and helpful response to it?
KSR: I don’t recall when I first had the idea: it was in the late 1970s sometime, and so completely distinct from current events. However, I will say that in the Mars books I began with a Muslim assassination of a Western leader (with Western guidance and pressure), and that made me feel I had to investigate and try to understand Islam so I wasn’t just writing a cliché. The Mars books have a large Islamic element in them, and so when I came to the alternative-history project, I was already aware that there was this other world culture that was huge and important and was not going to “westernize” willingly, etc. So the issue was on my mind through the 1990s.

IS/MW: In writing an alternative history, how do you decide how alternative it should be? Even in the absence of Europeans, there are still many features of your alternative history that are noticeably similar to our own history. The geopolitical dramas are new ones, of course, and there are some striking historical differences (Native Americans aren’t devastated by disease, for instance, and so are in a much more powerful position to resist foreign influence and invasion). But even in this alternative world, science seems to develop in much the same direction and in the same way as in our own world (even if the units of measurement are different—qi and li as names of atomic units, for instance); society seems to become secularized at roughly the same rate, women have to struggle to achieve equality, but do so at approximately the same pace, and so on. Does this say something about the necessity of science and indeed of the pace of human development? Or is this a matter of artistic choice? There is presumably a limit to just how different alternative histories can be before they lose their political edge, but at the same time one also longs for a totally different history in which human beings avoid some pathways entirely—such as mechanized warfare, for example.

KSR: I don’t think that last wish seems very likely, alas. Nation-states or equivalent political units are likely to fight in most alternative histories you can imagine, and each war’s technological advancement tends to surprise the military leadership, leading to catastrophes as we have seen in our world. Details may differ, but…. Anyway this is a good question, one of the crucial questions when contemplating alternative histories and what they are for, and how they can be of use. There are many ways to go about it, because there simply are no tests, and there is no solid historiography: it’s all description and we have no other examples to compare to our world history. I came down on the side of thinking that much of what we think of when we think of “History” is just theater in a way: leaders, wars, the big public events—they all could happen any old way, and still underneath it all would be the great majority of humanity doing their work, and that work would tend to forge along at a certain pace as people tried to solve the problems of making themselves more comfortable in this world. The Annaliste historians in France, like Fernand Braudel, do this kind of historical work and it is very instructive. It is a kind of Marxist history, too, but perhaps more descriptive. Thus, the rise of science depends on the myriad artisans in the metal shops, making the tools and developing the techniques that allow the theorists to test their theories. So I have
my alternative scientific revolution happening a little bit later without Europe, but therefore faster, as all the elements were there at hand.

Another seemingly Western development: feminism. Where does feminism come from, if not from the West? From women elsewhere, and probably in a mercantile culture where women have lots of economic responsibilities, as in Qing China. So I went at it with that basic historiography in mind. And I must say, the complaints about alternative histories being “too much like” our history are always balanced, sometimes in the same commentator, by complaints that it is “too different to be possible,” and I have concluded that really one can’t win: alternatives to our world history are in some deep sense unthinkable. The alternative history then becomes an exercise in pushing at that limit and always asking “why” to one’s responses concerning “plausibility” or the like. It’s a subject worth much more discussion.

**IS/MW:** Another question about form: both *Antarctica* and your forthcoming novels are science fictions that seem to be about the present, or perhaps the very near future. Certainly, this is a present with a difference: for instance, the extreme weather gear worn by the characters in *Antarctica* is more advanced than Gore-Tex. At the same time, you are dealing with a world that is in most ways recognizably our own. Can you tell us about the challenge of writing these kinds of novels and what writing about some parallel present (or near future) allows you to do and to explore?

**KSR:** I think of these as “day-after-tomorrow” novels, a subgenre of science fiction sometimes called “near-future science fiction.” It’s a valuable subgenre. For one thing, it’s a powerful way to write about the present without instantly producing a historical novel, as, for instance, if one wrote about 1999 in 1999, now so far in the past. I think it is crucial never to have a date in a day-after-tomorrow novel, and it’s also good to mix elements, so that some things are simply contemporary and have already happened (and there is a tremendous pleasure and value in writing about the present as if writing science fiction), while other elements would seem unlikely to emerge for twenty or fifty years—like cloning humans, which apparently already happened in South Korea last week. This captures the sense of perpetual newness in life these days, that anything is possible—so that people have asked me about the water slide under the South Pole in my *Antarctica*, for instance, because they simply can’t tell whether such a thing is possible or not anymore. Sometimes it seems like anything is possible; on the other hand, it also feels like nothing fundamental will ever change again (capitalism); and in that weird dichotomy of feeling we carry on day by day. It’s a strange sensation, and I think day-after-tomorrow sf can capture it very nicely, if wielded correctly. Here is a place where art as fidelity to the present may even demand science fiction, as I’ve been saying or rather practicing since the 1970s.

**IS/MW:** Your novels constitute one of the most sustained and thorough investigations of the implications and repercussions of the system of global capitalism in literature today. Repeatedly, and in quite subtle and sophisticated ways, you return to the trauma induced by private property, the corporation, scientific progress, and accumulation, and try to shed some light on alternative
possibilities. As bad (or even irreversible) as capitalism has become—and it seems in your novels both here to stay for the long term and also fated to come into existence, since capitalism emerges even in the absence of the Protestant ethic in The Years of Rice and Salt—there’s always the hope of new collective relations. This is certainly true of the Mars trilogy, where there are some extended dialogues about social problems and possibilities, as well as of Antarctica, which ends with stirring political speeches and a new model for human social relations forged out of the ice of the continent. And of course, as you point out, “what is true in Antarctica is true everywhere else.” Can you tell us about the nature of your engagement with these questions and how they find expression in fictional form?

KSR: It seems to me that we live in a feudal world, that the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the description of which is one of the triumphs of Marxist historiography, was in fact a very partial thing and that much residual feudalism remains that is seldom identified. This is one way of saying that the system we live in is grossly unjust and a danger to us all, now even to all the other species. So, this being the case, how then to proceed? Because it seems to me as if ordinary middle-class citizens of the West will eventually look like the French aristocracy before the Revolution if we do not respond to the injustice and cruelty in our system. So I have written my novels on the understanding that they are my political action, and that symbolic acts are also real acts. Also in purely aesthetic terms, this kind of engagement simply makes for better novels, because they become attempts to portray whole societies and to understand the why of them, which I take it is one of the most important things novels do, and why we love them. This trend of thought also tends to throw up new stories, which are of course very valuable to a novelist. In the end I must say I come to all this as someone wanting to write good novels. If ignoring politics and doing “art for art’s sake” would make the best novels, maybe I would go that way. But I don’t think that’s how it works. I should add, I would exempt scientific progress from the list of problems described in the question. Science to me is an attempt at a solution, a utopian politics that is unsafeguarded but powerful and a source of hope.

IS/MW: The interrogation of capitalism in your novels is often conducted through a concern with its impact on nature. Human habitation of Mars only becomes a necessity because the natural word has been depleted of its resources (reminding us of the greenhouse drifting through space in the film Silent Running [1972]). Even with this lesson in mind, humans repeat many of the same errors with respect to nature on Mars. Does nature have a future? Or is nature and our relation to it too abstract, on too large a scale for us to really comprehend its necessity for us? We can’t help but wonder about the relationship between the longevity treatments in the Mars trilogy, which allow human beings to live much longer lives, and the possibility of a changed relationship to nature. Does nature require time beyond the time of a normal human life in order for us to grasp it fully?

KSR: To me nature is the biosphere and can be experienced on a daily basis without much effort. Keep a garden. Go for a walk. Pay attention. Really, your
question’s understanding of nature is very far from mine, and seems written by an AI that never gets a chance to leave the world of texts. Maybe it’s like that for some, maybe that is the current trend in capitalism in our time, part of the commodification of everything. Jameson in his seminal postmodern essays talked about capitalism colonizing nature and the unconscious, and I think the combination leads to questions like this one, or the sight of scores of people “getting exercise” by running on treadmills in gyms, watching TV, or reading—the action of their own bodies and the experience of being outdoors in the wind not being sufficiently interesting to them.

Maybe by nature you mean wilderness. Even that is always around us, just outside the edges of the last development in any town. We are nature, we are immersed in nature: we never get out of it, we can sit in boxes and look at boxes, be like brains in bottles as in 1950s sf, and yet still we never get out of nature. We can ignore and misunderstand it, mistreat our bodies and waste our lives by being brains in bottles, but nature never goes away. This is something that we intellectuals, prone to being brains in bottles or couch potatoes or desk jockeys with word jobs, have to remember for our own health and also, crucially, the health and accuracy of our thinking about the world. In short, the question itself reveals capture by a capitalist world-view and seems to me sadly out of touch with reality. But maybe it is a semantic problem only.

IS/MW: With respect to nature, one of the things that your novels insist on is the need for humans to adapt to nature, as opposed to what we have been doing for much of our history, which is adapting nature to suit us. Terraforming a whole planet is the ultimate end of this process. It is a strange and disturbing irony that it might become easier to create a new habitable planet than to keep our “home” planet habitable by attending to it. In Antarctica, the hostile (and yet fragile) space of our southernmost continent demands that human beings who wish to live there not only have to adapt to it, but also have to be constantly conscious of their impact on nature. But living on much of the rest of the Earth seems to invite a more laissez-faire attitude to the natural world. What do your novels suggest about our attitudes toward and relationships to nature?

KSR: Much of this I answered indirectly in the question before. It will be easier to live sustainably on Earth than to terraform Mars, but my Mars novels were written with the idea that they are metaphors describing what we need to do here, too, and that it’s a matter of attitudes and intentions and individual actions, as well as global alteration technologies. It’s possible to imagine the “Great Work” that the bulk of humanity continues with despite the stupidities of the theatrical side of history, grinding onward to clean energy and a much more efficient and clean tech generally, to the point of sustainability, and even a reengagement with the real world as opposed to the various commodified virtual worlds. The question is, how many species will we have lost by then?

It may require some kind of werteschwandel—a mutation of values—but that too may happen in the underside of history, in the great work of the bulk. Hard to say, and surely there are forces trying to wreck this work for selfish reasons. Anyway, in a practical sense I think everyone should go outside a lot everyday, and do free things like walk and talk, and try to keep a garden. Gardening is a
reengagement with nature that is practical (you eat the results) and soothing, absorbing, pleasurable, but also on another level terrifying, in that it teaches you that we don’t know it all and bad things can happen—that you can’t take success or food for granted. It would be a good grounding activity.

IS/MW: The longevity treatments we alluded to above also bring out another theme that you seem fascinated with: the significance of memory for identity, and of the importance of locating a home—a space into which one fits and which accords in some sense with one’s memories. The attempt to “indigenize” Antarctica is an example of this, as is X’s discovery of a place and a purpose by the end of the novel. In The Years of Rice and Salt, the return of the main characters to the bardo after each of the historical episodes, where they are reborn but wiped clean of their memories, is another site at which you probe the connections between memory and home. But it is the connection made in the Mars books between the extension of lifespan through the longevity treatments and the corresponding loss of memory that we find most intriguing. We are thinking especially of a scene in Blue Mars, where Mike returns to his hometown on Earth after having lived a whole other life on Mars. Revisiting the site where his earliest memories were formed has an unexpectedly powerful impact on him. How and why does memory figure in your novels?

KSR: I’ve always been fascinated by memory, in theory and in my own life—my own memories. The idea that life extension might not lead to memory extension came to me early, with Icehenge (1984), and I’ve been exploring it since then, because it’s true already; as I’ve grown older I’ve lost the sense I used to have that I had an almost photographic memory of my own life. That lasted up till I was about thirty, but now I don’t feel that way, and often wonder if I should start writing everything I can remember down before I forget it. I also run an interesting memory experiment of writing down what happens every day at bedtime in a weekly calendar so there are only four lines per day; then I read what we were doing ten years ago, and fifteen (my record only goes back nineteen years, to about the time I had this feeling I wasn’t remembering it all anymore). Rereading the brief entries from ten and fifteen years ago is a strange and interesting experience because sometimes nothing is evoked, but at other times the phrases will call up a detailed memory of the entire day. I’m concluding that our storage capacity is simply immensely bigger than our recall, and that’s strange evolutionarily: why should that be, and how did that come to pass?

So writing stories about these issues has always been a great pleasure and, indeed, I wish I could find more opportunities, more plots; maybe I’ll hunt deliberately for more. Also maybe this is why I think Proust’s novel is the greatest one of all (though there are more reasons than this)—it’s all about memory.

Certainly identity is a function of memory. Where would identity be without it?

IS/MW: Your novels have sometimes been characterized as utopian fictions. In the Mars trilogy, we see what might be described as the “literalization” of utopia. Within the fictional landscape of the novels, we get to witness a real
attempt to construct a new human society from the ground up—an attempt that is able to take into account all of the successes (as few as they are) and failures of social projects on Earth, and so possibly create a utopian political space on the blank slate of Mars. Your novels are unusually alert to the difficulties of transforming potentialities into actualities (Mars is no utopia, after all) without engaging in cynicism or dystopian imaginings: the potential for newness remains perpetually open. How do you see the relationship between your writing and utopian fiction? And what do you think the function of such fictions are?

KSR: I think of myself as a utopian novelist, and that seems to me a mix of genres (utopias not starting as novels per se), but the mix is fruitful as it makes for interesting stories. The old attack on utopias as boring is partly a political attack, partly a result of them not being novels enough. I’ve been aware of the power of this mix ever since staying up all night to read Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) when it came out—that novels could be more interesting trying to tell the story of a society improving in some sense than ordinary novels just accepting the way things are, and telling some small part of that. The angle and the attitude are very fruitful. I think all science fiction has a utopian element, in that it tends to say that what we do now matters and will have consequences. It’s a denial of nihilism.

It also gets into the deep problems of making any progress, the resistance to that from both without and within, the resistance to change and the fear of change. All the political questions come into play, and then, once again, you have the possibility of very interesting new stories, new novels, coming up—which is gold if you are a novelist.

IS/MW: Is it possible that a small, privileged segment of global elites, dispersed across the globe but concentrated in the “West,” is experiencing a kind of utopia now—though one, of course, that cannot be universalized since it exists on the backs of the world’s impoverished majority? What if utopia is partial, a political fantasy that depends on a certain form of forgetting? What if, as bad as the present is, this is as good as it’s going to get and the future can only be apocalyptic?

KSR: That would be bad, but I don’t think it’s the case. Pocket utopias are not utopias; I wrote about this in *Pacific Edge*. Was the French aristocracy a utopia? No. This definition of utopia as “forgetting the oppressed” tends to be an attack on utopian ideas in general, claiming they are hypocritical or impossible. We’re none of us in utopia now, even the super-rich in their mansions. Utopia is a name for one course of history, a progressive course in which things become more just and sustainable over the generations. We’re not there now, but depending on what we do, and what our descendants do, we could still be said to be living in a utopian history, as being on the path. I prefer to work as if that were the case. And it seems to me the great work continues.

MW: I recently attended a conference on science fiction and social change, which involved writers, fans, and academics. Three science-fiction writers were invited (Robert Sawyer, Candas Jane Dorsey, and Timothy Anderson) to participate in a roundtable discussion on whether science fiction is or was essential to social change (i.e., in the way that the *Star Trek* series in the 1960s
might be seen as having contributed in some way to the cause of civil rights), and whether an interest in social change determines how one conceptualizes the future. How do you feel about your books as engines for social change?

KSR: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” I think we as a global culture are sharply aware of History as a process we are all engaged in and can partly control, or try to control; actually, control is an open question, but we act in the present, collectively, with the idea that it will make things better in the future. This being the case (it was not always true in the past, and is a kind of Enlightenment/American-French Revolution discovery), visions of the future matter, as being attempts to describe what we are working toward, or what we should avoid. The utopian/dystopian aspects of science fiction are very deep and perhaps unavoidable, even when not the major focus of any single work. They make science fiction a tool of human thought, like all literature, but with this particular emphasis on “social change.”

What happens, I think, is that all the sf novels and movies together create a kind of “consensus future” that then becomes regarded as somehow inevitable. If true, this means there is a great danger of imagining futures that are mirrors of the present only, or that depict things as hopelessly out of control, or even worse, as overdetermined beyond humanity’s ability to change them—the future as mortgaged and locked down by contracts backed by police and armies. This is why cyberpunk, or American-imperial Heinleinism, or the “future-war” subgenres are ugly, in that they are not truly dystopic, but rather portray the current triumph of capitalism as inevitable, eternal, and unbeatable. Locating the settings in Japan or space does nothing to change the defeatism inherent in these subgenres.

Given that, I have felt it is important to write utopian fiction, defined very broadly, to suggest in almost every novel that change happens, that we are history and nothing else makes it—us and physics—and that it is possible to improve conditions for humanity over time, despite the obvious manifest flaws in this system. Also, that humanity’s well-being depends on the well-being of the planet’s biosphere generally, so that environmentalism has to join the other crucial utopian goals. If the “consensus future” feels that we will accomplish these achievements, they are likelier to happen.

It’s in this sense that science itself is a “utopian science fiction” working to make itself real. It, too, represents a “consensus future.” Maybe we should say that “scientists are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” and contemplate for a while what that means.

Also, looking at it this way is an enormously powerful generator of new stories. In a practical sense this is a great help to a novelist.

IS/MW: At the “Futures of Utopia” conference, which you attended as a keynote speaker, Fredric Jameson read a paper in which he argued that the function of utopia “lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment within a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined” (“The Politics of Utopia” 46). How would you react to this claim?
KSR: In a way I find it comforting, in that it would explain the difficulty I have when trying to think out my novels: it’s impossible! So I don’t have to feel bad.

But I would want to add that in fact it may be easier to imagine a radically different society—easy as can be, in some ways, in that one merely expresses wishes and defines some version of justice, equality, peace. That’s all easy. What’s hard is imagining any plausible way of getting from here to there. And this is where science fiction comes in. Fantasy is ahistorical and can imagine the Good Place without strings, across the Great Trench that More describes in his Utopia. Science fiction, however, is defined by the history infolded in the future described that leads back to now. There, in contemplating a history getting to that place, it gets very hard to imagine. So the result is imaginable, but not the process of getting there; perhaps that’s what Jameson meant when he talked about the “future being unimaginable,” not as destination but as process, as history. It’s not “a future” that is unimaginable, but “a history to a good future place.” This interpretation would fit with Jameson’s injunction to “always historicize,” including his own sentences, I assume.

So, then, the challenge to the novelist would be: imagine a history that gets us from here to there. It will be hard (impossible), but in trying, the problem is pointed to (Jameson says this, too). And again, new stories are thereby generated. They may be implausible stories, but given the situation, these implausible stories, mangled in some aesthetic “realist” sense, may nevertheless be of value as art in a different way. I hope so.

IS/MW: Do you think that it is productive for academics to theorize science fiction?

KSR: Certainly. I know I find it useful, and I think also that it is good for literature studies generally in considering matters of genre, the political unconscious, etc. What is realism? What does it mean to say a story takes place in the future? What is a symbol? How does the estrangement effect work? What’s the best way to depict our global moment? And so on.

It also creates connections between professors and their students, in that students may still be surprised that the books they are reading for their own entertainment are also being taken seriously by their teachers, and, together, the work done in classes on science fiction can bring a lot to both students and teachers. It breaks up the dead hand of the past, the canon, and makes literature living again.

I know there has been a reaction against academic criticism of science fiction, sometimes expressed as “keep science fiction in the gutter where it belongs,” which seems to me to be one of the manifestations of ghetto psychology. When the wall comes down and the world pours into the ghetto, everything changes; when the ghetto also turns out to have been “right” in some fundamental sense, so that the world actually becomes the ghetto, it is even more disorienting. But I think the valuable “disreputable” gutter aspects of science fiction will survive academic engagement. It’s the world becoming an sf meta-novel that is the bigger danger for the genre, in the sense of “what do we do now?”
Another complaint against academic study of sf is that the sf canon has been set too soon and is too small, so that critics have only been writing about half a dozen writers. This has been partly true and a shame, but to get published critics must write about writers other critics have also read, unless they are doing an introductory piece, and so it’s a natural phenomenon. As the field matures we see good work so far overlooked being rediscovered.

IS/MW: Are there specific philosophical positions, thinkers, or ideas that have influenced your work? In what ways?

KSR: I’m like anyone else in that regard: of course I have been influenced by positions, thinkers, and ideas in my work. One couldn’t not be. In my case, I would say the principal thinkers who have influenced me have been the novelists—all of them I’ve read, in some kind of chorus. I have been lucky, too, in my teachers, and would say I came to both Marxism and contemporary literary criticism and culture theory through Fredric Jameson, and I came to Buddhism and poetry and a way of being a Californian through Gary Snyder. My friends also have a big impact on my thinking. All that has come together into an ideology that makes sense to me. It’s been a long process and is still ongoing.

IS/MW: How do the Mars novels look to you a little more than a decade after they first appeared? This is perhaps an impossible question to answer, but what might the Mars trilogy look like if it was written today?

KSR: When I look back into them for readings or what not, I mostly like what I read. That’s a relief, most of all, a pleasure. They hold up. If I wrote them today, I would just hope to make them like they are. It would be hard. I think of writing them now as a kind of possession.

IS/MW: What can we expect from you in the near future?

KSR: I’m in the midst of these global warming novels which form a sequence, maybe a trilogy, maybe more. I’m interested in some of the ideas I’ve written about above—constructing a life that more resembles the Paleolithic life, as being the time when our brains grew to their current size: this as an escape from and an assault on capitalism, on the individual level. “Voluntary simplicity” is one name for this kind of thinking, but I want it to be more active than renunciation, to be a form of celebrating reality in the form of our bodies and the immediate home and landscape around us. How to get people (like my kids) re-interested in the real world and the outdoors as over against the virtual and the indoors. The novels will be about that in some sense. I think of it as … more science fiction.