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# Nothing but blue skies

*For Canadian sci-fi giant Robert J. Sawyer, the future is bright*

BY GARY BUTLER

**H**aving published 17 books in as many years, and with a plan to maintain a similar level of production for another dozen years or so, Robert J. Sawyer is doing what science fiction authors do best: looking forward to the future.

Specifically, the year 2030, when Sawyer plans to begin rereading his books for the first time ever, starting with his 1990 debut, *Golden Fleece*. “I want 40 years’ remove,” he says, sitting in his penthouse condo just west of Toronto. “I want time on my hands and *complete* detachment.”

In the here and now, though, Sawyer’s literary legacy is a going concern year-round. The 47-year-old, Ottawa-born, Toronto-raised “dean of Canadian science fiction” (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1999) is the only Canadian author to win all three of the world’s top awards for best science-fiction novel of the year: the Nebula in 1996 for *The Terminal Experiment*; the Hugo in 2003 for *Hominids*; and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award in 2006 for *Mindscan*. He is ranked among the most successful modern creators in his genre, anywhere, and does particularly well in Canada, selling as many copies of his novels here as he does in the U.S.

He still wishes his chosen genre got a little more respect, though. “I’m often surprised at how willfully uninterested people are in science fiction,” he says. “It’s a literature of ideas,” embracing “science, philosophy, history, and ethics.” On the other hand, he admits that *New York Times* columnist David Itzkoff recently leveled “a valid criticism: that a great deal of science fiction today is, by design, exclusionary.”

In this light, Sawyer’s success can in great part be attributed to a strategy he calls “deliberate accessibility” – a conscious effort to make his novels concise, and easily approachable by genre fans and non-fans alike. “My job is to carve away the jargon and leave behind the awe,” he says.

Sawyer’s newest book, *Rollback*, appeared in April with his longtime publisher Tor Books in the U.S. (It’s distributed in Canada by H.B. Fenn and Company.) Like its forerunners, it’s a jargon-light, deceptively simple, and edutaining read. “It’s easy to dismiss pellucid prose as being neither beautiful nor an achievement,” Sawyer allows. But lurking between the often fun-filled lines of zippy, expository dialogue are the kinds of weighty ethical dilemmas that have made Sawyer, well, almost famous. *Rollback* posits the contemporary reception of a coded alien radio transmission, and jumps back and forth between now and the year 2048, when a second, newly encrypted message arrives. In the future scenario, cutting-edge technology is employed to “roll back” (essentially de-age) an octogenarian couple who might hold a key place in the aliens’ curious plan. Freedom of information, overpopulation, health care, the definition of the concept of family – all of these issues and more provide *Rollback*’s grist and conflict, just as previous Sawyer novels have dealt with racism (*Illegal Alien*, 1997), fatalism (*Flashforward*, 1999), and copyright (*Mindscan*, 2005), to name but a few.

Even within the fan-friendly science fiction community, Sawyer is unusually well connected to his readership. He feels that being available to his fans is part of his job description. “Gallop polls tell us that readers primarily buy *authors*, not books,” he says. “When those readers go out of their way to show interest in your work, to not

respond to that interest is to torpedo yourself.” So Sawyer has a policy of same-day responses for all fan e-mails (even those containing unsolicited manuscripts, to which he replies with a form letter of polite decline that also offers professional advice), a succinct website address (SFwriter.com, to which RobertJSawyer.com also links) and outstanding search-engine visibility. Sawyer maintains that he was the first modern science fiction writer to brand himself with a website; he acquired the “SFwriter” domain in 1998 and manages it personally with his wife of 22 years, poet Carolyn Clink, who also helps manage his business affairs full-time. And although the couple moved to Mississauga several years ago – to a condo twice the size of the biggest one they could find in downtown Toronto – Sawyer still pays an extra fee to be listed in the Toronto phone book, “for the people looking for me in the city they *think* I live in.”

Sawyer is also a ruthless manager of his own schedule. He estimates that about 10 e-mails per day require custom responses, taking up about an hour. “And I resent that time,” he says. He works seven days a week, and the definition of “work” covers many tasks, including writing/editing, developing personal marketing strategies, and graciously participating in too-long media interviews. Each novel takes a year of his life: three to four months of research (mostly reading, predominantly popular science, philosophy, and history – his favourite part of the process); two to three months for the first draft, writing a fixed target of 2,000 words per day (“it’s



the only part I don't enjoy – like a sculptor making his own clay"); three to four months of revisions, yielding anywhere from four to eight drafts before the book is "abandoned, never finished"; and finally, two months of vigorous promotion.

Promotion often means self-promotion, though this is no criticism of Sawyer's Canadian distributor, H.B. Fenn, whose staff he describes as "just super people." (The affection flows both ways: in his hallway, Sawyer beams over a framed plaque-mounted triptych poster collecting the covers for his Neanderthal trilogy, which the Fenn team commissioned in 2003 for no other reason than to show how much they enjoyed working with him.) Still, there is rarely enough money available for significant promotion. As a result, Sawyer does everything he can to bolster Fenn's efforts. At press time, Sawyer was scheduled to appear at the Saskatchewan Library Association's annual meeting on May 3 – a trip he parlayed into a mini-tour, hitting five western cities and staying with friends in Winnipeg and Calgary. (He also has several Ontario appearances scheduled

for May.) Sawyer and Clink go everywhere together. "We can eat for less than \$40 a day," they say proudly. "It helps to not drink (alcohol)."

It also helps that Sawyer is as savvy about managing his finances as he is about managing his time, though he allows himself a few guilty pleasures. His condo is filled with collectables (the strict purchase criterion for dinosaur action figures, for example, is that each body be anatomically accurate based on the available science at the time of its manufacture) and original cover art for a number of his books.


Today, Sawyer happily settles for plaque-mounted marketing posters. Despite being budget-conscious, though, he admits that he's well off, particularly in comparison with most Canadian writers, regardless of genre. His career economic goal is to "retire at 60, before I'm 'dispublished' – because the marketplace dictates retirement." But while he has the business attitude of a realist, Sawyer prefers to think of himself as an optimist. He appreciates that science fiction authors are expected to be "the conscience of the tech age" – and agrees that

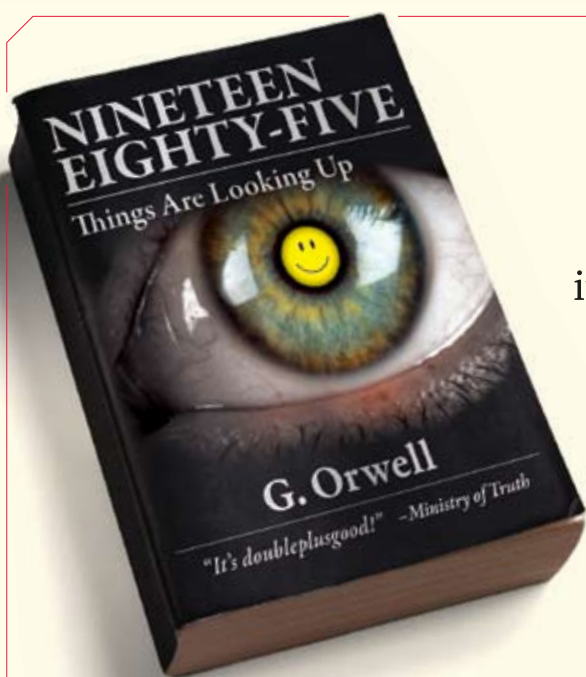
such should be the case – but adds that we all have it within ourselves to ask the big questions and effect positive change. "After all, the world is a better place when people are in a good mood."

Asked about post-millennium tension – prevailing theories about the world coming to an ignominious end in the next half-century, whether the issue at hand is overpopulation, the environment, war/terrorism, or machines achieving consciousness and battling humans – his sole concern is war. He believes the population boom will level off by 2040, likely due to a plague gone worldwide overnight. He also believes that civilization will still rally to save the environment, "despite 200 years of benign indifference." Machine consciousness will eventually occur, but it won't be planned, and with his next book, tentatively titled *Wake*, he hopes to achieve what "no one has done yet: tell a story about a machine that outthinks us and give it a *positive* outcome."

That novel is the first in his long-planned WWW trilogy – the sequels dubbed *Watch* and *Wonder* – wherein the Internet becomes sentient. *Wake* sits in manuscript form on Sawyer's side table, its top page littered with editorial notations. Asked about rumours that he's in negotiations to sell Penguin Canada the Canadian rights to the trilogy, Sawyer says only that he's signed no contract for his next book yet.

It's classic literary conflict #1 that most worries this futurist: human vs. human. Sawyer reclassifies the war on terror as "the war on insanity," adding that technology has made it possible for madmen to threaten cities, countries, races, the entire world, where previously they would have been limited to "burning down a few huts." He angrily criticizes fundamentalism on both sides of the war – the "apocalypticist in the White House" concerns him as much as the ones in the Middle East. Nonetheless, he remains optimistic, proud to trumpet Canada as a "semi-socialist model of a compassionate society – a model that works. And the only way to survive as a planet is to be compassionate."

He gazes out his penthouse's wide window; the uninterrupted cityscape stretches from edge to edge. On the wall next to the window is the original cover art for *Golden Fleece*: a sleek spaceship soars past a starbow (a rainbow in outer space). "In general, I like humanity," Sawyer says. "We mean well, and the future is bright." 



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