

JAMES MORROW: AN INTERVIEW

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Award-winning author James Morrow takes on the foibles and inconsistencies of Western religion with wit and vigor, holding up a mirror and asking, "How far will we go?" Booklist dubs him a "genius" and compares him to Twain, Heller, and Vonnegut, for bringing much needed humor to this too-serious subject. The Science Fiction/Fantasy community has honored him with two Nebulas (1989 short story "Bible Stories for Adults #17: The Deluge" and 1990 novella *City of Truth*) and a World Fantasy Award (1990 *Only Begotten Daughter*.) In this interview from his home in State College, Pennsylvania, Morrow discusses his debt to the SF/F community, scientific humanism, organized religion, the literary roots of his stories, and the difficulties of addressing the "big questions" in satire.

FAITH L. JUSTICE: You've been called "one of the great modern satirists" and claim Twain, Vonnegut, and Heller among your literary influences. How did you wind up writing in the SF/fantasy genre vs. mainstream fiction?

JAMES MORROW: As early as my first novel, *The Wine of Violence*, I was producing fiction that obviously partook as much of satire and allegory as of "SF/Fantasy." But the events in *Wine* occurred on another planet, and the people got there in spaceships, and so we all looked at each other -- my agent, my editor, and me -- and we said, "It probably makes sense to market this as science fiction, but let's hope we can somehow reach a cross-over audience."

That was two decades ago. Twenty years later, we're all still looking at each other and saying, "It probably makes sense to market this as science fiction, but let's hope we can somehow reach a cross-over audience."

I'm not a fatalist. I don't like Original Sin scenarios. But it's possible that, in defining myself as an SF author right at the beginning, I have irretrievably exiled myself from the Garden of Mainstream Acceptance.

If I had it to do over, however, I suspect I'd choose to lapse from grace once again. Now, sure, I'd love to have the large audience enjoyed by Twain and Heller. (Though I would not want to acquire that audience at the price of Twain and Heller's present ontological status.) Naturally I would like to connect with Vonnegut's vast readership. But it's important to remember this: there's no obscurity like publishing a mainstream novel that goes nowhere. Heller was the first to admit that, for every *Catch-22*, fifty equally worthy mainstream novels fall by the wayside. (I was privileged to have Heller for a teacher when I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania, and I always admired his self-deprecating demeanor.) Whereas, the SF community has a way of continually giving an

author a new lease on life. At the moment, for example, I'm almost completely in print, in trade paperbacks labeled "science fiction/fiction," whatever that means.

I hate marketing categories. They have nothing to do with the art of fiction, and everything to do with the non-art of shelving books. How ironic that the most commercial Hollywood director enjoys greater freedom from labels than does the most artistically ambitious SF author. When you go to the multiplex cinema, there's none of the presumptuous geography that governs a book store or a library -- you don't find a special screen for SF films, another dedicated to mysteries, another for serious drama, and so on. The boundaries are porous.

I shall always feel enormously indebted to the SF world. It's given me an audience, critical acclaim, half a living wage, and more than my share of awards. And here's the most powerful argument of all: by working in relative obscurity, addressing myself to the freewheeling, low-pressure science fiction community, I think I've probably done *better work* -- more biting, more audacious, more honest -- than if I'd quickly become a high-profile writer. And in my haltingly idealistic fashion, I shall always insist that the work, not the royalty check, is what counts most.

Now, if the mainstream wants to discover me at this point in my career, that would be perfectly all right with me. I could use the money.

FLJ: Your stories are always fantastical yet grounded in the real world. What kind of research do you do to keep the "science" in science fiction?

JM: Even since *This Is the Way the World Ends*, I've attempted to work simultaneously in two very different -- perhaps even incompatible -- idioms: the utterly fanciful and the utterly mundane. I'm intrigued by the artistic possibilities that unfold in that kind of literary no-man's-land. One finds a similar landscape in Kafka's stories, though without the strain of scientific rationality that runs through my work.

World Ends turns on a wholly supernatural premise -- a temporary reprieve for the "unadmitted" victims of human extinction -- but the disaster itself is treated realistically. I read dozens of books on the effects of nuclear blasts (short-term and long-term), the perverse logic of so-called "strategic doctrine," and the Nuremberg precedent whereby the "unadmitted" put their murderers on trial. The situation is impossible, but the suffering is real.

Only Begotten Daughter features the same strategy: an absurdist premise counterpoised against lots of research into Atlantic City, Christian theology, the scientific worldview, and all the other components of my heroine's mental and physical universe. With *Towing Jehovah*, I found out as much as I could about supertankers and oil spills, the better to lend an air of spurious credibility to the conceit of a flesh-and-blood Corpus Dei. For *Blameless in Abaddon*, I obviously spent a lot of time investigating the field of theodicy, so that the courtroom scenes would feel plausible even though the defendant happens to be God.

The argument I make to myself goes something like this: if I do enough research, augmenting the premise of the moment with lots of gritty particulars, then at a certain point I will start to *believe* that premise, no matter how ridiculous. And if I believe it, then maybe the reader will believe it as well.

*FLJ: I've always admired your quirky complicated characters -- people just on the edge of mainstream, neighbors with a twist. You did it again in *The Eternal Footman* with Nora Burkhart, the ex-English teacher and flower-delivery person, and Gerard Korty the reclusive "modern Michelangelo." Where did they come from?*

JM: This issue of characterization dovetails neatly into the research question you asked earlier. It's the other side of the coin: how might a writer invest his characters with enough humanity that we care about them even if they're living through impossible events?

A common criticism of SF is that it settles for far too simplistic an understanding of the human psyche. In the words of Thomas Disch, the genre lacks "a decent sense of despair." It's a fair complaint, I feel. There's certainly no evidence that, as our species becomes increasingly dependent on technology and our world becomes increasingly science-fictional, we're losing our psychological complexity. Indeed, most people would argue that inner turmoil and ineffable existential dread have *increased* in the post-industrial age.

Nobody in a feudal fantasy like *The Lord of the Rings* or *Dune* experiences anxiety attacks of unknown origin. Nobody has to cope with migraines or hemorrhoids or suicidal depression. Maybe they shouldn't. Maybe that kind of realism would destroy the very conventions that permit such novels to delight us. But I *do* worry when an author places a caste system at the center of a novel and then fails to ask searching questions about it. To make any sense of the *Dune* books, you have to assume that the average Sardaukar storm-trooper or Bene Gesserit witch has nothing that we would call an inner life. That's not a leap I enjoy making.

Having said all this, let me hasten to confess that I've always found characterization to be the hardest aspect of novel-writing. I conceive of my stories in terms of themes and situations first, human psychology second. If I were completely honest, I'd have to admit that the *main* reason I give my characters vivid occupations – Murray Katz processing snapshots, George Paxton carving tombstones, Nora Burkhart delivering flowers, Gerard Korty sculpting the Divine Comedy – is that it simplifies the characterization problem. This strategy affords me lots of "objective correlatives" for my character's mental states, including their self-doubts and neuroses. That's better than the stupid conceit of a worry-free Sardaukar, but it's certainly not the highest variety of psychological fiction. I'm not Dostoyevsky.

FLJ: What does your typical creative day look like?

JM: The alarm clock rings. Kathy and Jim send Pooka the Border collie to wake up Christopher, the eleven-year-old (my son, Kathy's stepson). Kathy makes Chris's breakfast. Jim takes Amtrak the Doberman for a walk, a process that usually yields at least two good ideas – a line of dialogue, a juicy metaphor, a structural tactic – for that day's scene.

Chris eats breakfast while reading the funnies. Jim, Kathy, Chris, and Pooka walk a quarter-mile to the bus stop. (For reasons not worth explaining, the best way for my son to get to school is on a public bus.) While Kathy and Chris ride downtown together, Jim heads for home with Pooka. He typically gets two or three more good ideas along the way.

The rest of the day is a dance among competing obligations. Jim tries to get a load of dishes washed ... to have at least one nourishing conversation with Kathy ... and to jog twice around the block. But mostly he writes and writes and writes. It's an addiction.

I sometimes worry that, if the Prince of Darkness came to me and said, "Just sign here, and I'll give you unlimited writing time for the rest of your life," I would start looking around for a pen. That would be wrong on many levels, of course. My family needs me, and vice-versa. Besides, I've *already* got a better schedule – more opportunity to practice my craft – than 95% of the authors on this planet.

This situation could change overnight, of course, but right now I'm still in a position to write thematically ambitious books that take two or three years between conception and publication. I'm very lucky.

FLJ: You've described Towing Jehovah as a fantastical Lord Jim and Blameless in Abaddon as a retelling of the Book of Job. What are the literary roots of The Eternal Footman?

JM: Its primary touchstone is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. I'm not very subtle about this ancestry. My heroine spends part of the novel traveling with a theatre company that's producing a more-or-less faithful adaptation of *Gilgamesh* in a succession of southern towns.

We hear a lot these days, especially from academic precincts, about the deterministic nature of human language and culture. There is no such thing as a universal human spirit, the postmodern intellectuals argue. All realities – moral, epistemological, psychological – are ultimately "local," conditioned by immediate social and linguistic norms. Even science, the postmoderns say, can be profitably scrutinized through this radically relativistic lens.

And yet here's *Gilgamesh*, the world's oldest surviving epic, speaking to us with poignancy and immediacy about the bedrock tragedy of the human condition. The theme is the inescapability of death, and the poem tells us how utterly human it is to wish that things were otherwise. If *Gilgamesh* is essentially "local," then I say the hell with it.

The Eternal Footman also owes a debt to Camus's *The Plague* and to Peter Barnes's marvelous play about the Black Death, *Red Noses*. As I've commented elsewhere, it's possible to map the whole Godhead Trilogy onto the Divine Comedy. *Towing Jehovah* corresponds to the *Purgatorio* – the characters are trapped in a gray domain defined by their moral limitations. *Blameless in Abaddon* is the *Inferno* in a different key. ("Abaddon" is a Hebrew word that can be translated as "hell.") And *Footman*, with its glimpses of a post-theistic utopia, might be regarded as a kind of *Paradiso*. But this is all rather cerebral. Let's drop it and go on to the next question.

FLJ: You've lamented that, unlike nineteenth-century writers, modern novels deal primarily with "quotidian life and its discontents." What are the grand questions you wrestle with in this trilogy, and did you come up with any answers?

JM: This is a great question, Faith, but I could spend the rest of the week trying to answer it!

Let me attempt an end run around the problem . Let me talk briefly about the gap between the cosmic riddles I *thought* I'd be confronting in the Godhead Trilogy and the riddles I really *did* confront.

Before I actually wrote *Towing Jehovah*, I'd assumed it would be a satire on the common notion that, when a society loses faith in God, it ceases to be moral. But eventually I took the theme much more seriously, and I ended up giving theism its due. Once the crew of the *Carpco Valparaiso* discovers that nobody is peering down from Heaven, they lose their moral compass: murders and orgies start becoming the norm.

But only temporarily. By the end of act two, the Kantian categorical imperative has taken hold, and the crew starts behaving decently again. So a novel that began life as a kind of science-fictional joke – what if God died? – ended up addressing other sorts of questions. How do we account for ethical behavior? What might a non-theistic morality look like? Do we behave decently merely because we fear divine retribution, or are we a better species than that?

I went into *Blameless in Abaddon* knowing that the plot would revolve around God's long overdue trial for crimes against humanity. But until I began investigating theodicy in depth, I had no idea that the case for the defense could be so rich and complex. Christian theologians have been explaining God's ostensible complicity in human suffering for nearly 2,000 years, and they've accomplished a lot – so much, in fact, that I decided to have the World Court judges return a "not guilty" verdict. And here I thought a single case of childhood cancer would make the prosecution's case!

But there's a problem, of course. Because after you've hammered together your beautiful little theodicy – whether you're Saint Augustine or C. S. Lewis – you're still stuck with that suffering child. So while the World Court was ultimately willing to let God off the hook, you can be sure that James Morrow was not.

On the drawing board, *The Eternal Footman* was supposed to address the following theme: "No matter what the clerics tell us, death means nothing but oblivion, and it's also the primary source from which the world's religions draw their energy." But during the composition process, I realized that death is a more ambiguous phenomenon than my original notes allowed. I still have no use for it in my personal life, but I can see how – from the broadest evolutionary and historical perspective –the case for death's necessity is probably even better than the case for God's goodness.

As for the notion that death-denial lies at the heart of most religions, I have one of the characters in *Footman* say this very explicitly. But I'm no longer prepared to *reduce* religion to that formula. Like *Towing Jehovah*, *The Eternal Footman* got me speculating about the genesis of ethical behavior, and I concluded that religiously-rooted narratives like the Good Samaritan certainly have their part to play.

FLJ: In The Eternal Footman you propose two alternative utopias: Deus Absconditus and Holistica. Which one would you want to live in and why?

JM: The great challenge I faced in writing *The Eternal Footman* was to move beyond my usual anti-religious satire and offer a few glimpses of a world that has somehow evolved beyond God. This is Deus Absconditus. It's not Utopia, but it is a "land of the grown-ups."

Readers who examine my hostility to organized churches closely will notice the gravamen of my indictment centers on the idea that religion infantilizes us. In the West, this infantilization process is displayed in much of our religious rhetoric. God is a "father." Jesus wants us to approach him as "children." Many Christians fancy themselves "born again." (Let's remember, to be "born" means to enter a state of infancy, not a state of enlightenment.)

Anybody familiar with my oeuvre knows that I think children are absolutely marvelous beings. But they are not adults. They aren't obligated to shoulder the same moral responsibilities as grown-ups. When Jerry Falwell or Billy Graham tells you how the world works, listen very closely. You will hear a child talking.

Holistica is presented as a kind of New Age alternative to Deus Absconditus, and I think it's essentially a nightmare. At its worst, the New Age mentality is even worse than the organized-church mentality. It doesn't just invite us to be children. It invites us to abandon rationality altogether. It asks us to be chipmunks.

FLJ: In The Eternal Footman, one of your protagonists, Nora Burkhart, suffers a terrible punishment for "loving her child too much." Earlier in the story she makes a choice which she thinks will save her son, but knows it means the death of many others. Since God is dead, who punishes her?

JM: Nora's situation constitutes the most tragic and ambiguous trap I've ever set for a protagonist. She's not fundamentally a victim: indeed, she's the savior of civilization. But she's still trapped.

When one of my death avatars, Quincy the fetch, tells Nora that she loved her child too much, he's not necessarily speaking the truth. A few pages later, Nora's rescuer tells her, "Death is a lousy philosopher." But I wanted to raise the bedeviling and maddening idea that, in our determination to do right by our loved ones, we may do other people harm.

I won't give away the emotional climax of *Footman* – I won't say exactly how Nora is punished – but her downfall presumably traces to what, throughout the novel, I call God's "death throes." Yes, the Supreme Being is "dead," but his dark side still sends out reverberations, most conspicuously the fetches. Only after the last fetch vanishes do we truly enter the "post-theistic age."

FLJ: You've said that satire is the child of anger and comedy. In your writings on western religion, where does your anger come from? Your comedic touch?

JM: As I mentioned in my recent *Paradoxa* interview with Samuel R. Delany, people are sometimes surprised to learn that my childhood contacts with religion were undramatic. My readers assume that, given the vehemence with which I question Christianity's legitimacy, I must be working through some terrible, quasi-repressed trauma. They think I was hit with a ruler by a nun, or I had to empty a Lutheran minister's bedpan – something like that.

My religious upbringing was actually quite tepid and generic – a white Presbyterian Church in the Philadelphia suburbs. My skepticism comes primarily from reading the world's great disbelievers – Voltaire, Twain, Ibsen, Camus, and so on – and realizing that their anguish and their disaffection felt *honest* to me in a way that the theistic worldview never did. To use my earlier terminology, Voltaire and Camus seemed to be among the real *grown-ups* on the planet.

Let me hasten to add that, while my skepticism is essentially intellectual, that doesn't mean it's *passionless*. Quite the contrary. For me, thinking and feeling are inextricably intermixed.

To quote from the aforementioned Samuel R. Delany interview: "I guess I'm writing for readers who, whether they're believers or not, are viscerally disturbed, on an almost daily basis, by Christianity's claim to occupy some moral and epistemological high ground. My imagined audience includes people who've noticed that you can't depend on religion to get us thinking intelligently about war, peace, ethics, eros, gender, nature, intolerance, or human origins – *au contraire*, religion often gets us thinking about these problems in vacuous and ugly ways – and this state of affairs shakes them to the core. It drives them crazy. It makes them want to scream."

The comedy in my fiction, I feel, functions as a kind of Trojan horse. It lets me smuggle all sorts of grand opinions into each story without seeming too pretentious.

Woody Allen does it better than I do. He has a gift for condensing a devastating – yet at the same time rather subtle – critique of the theistic worldview into a single line. In *Love and Death*, Allen raises the possibility that God is "evil," then quickly adds that he's probably just an "underachiever" instead. In *Deconstructing Harry*, the protagonist tells his sister, "Given a choice between the Pope and air conditioning, I'll take air conditioning."

FLJ: You call yourself a "scientific humanist." What does that mean?

JM: I like that term – first heard it in connection with Jacob Bronowski – because there's something slightly paradoxical and ambiguous about it. And I think that worthy fiction always partakes of paradox and ambiguity.

C.P. Snow's famous dichotomy between "the two cultures," scientists versus humanists, goes back to 1962, and I think it's still very much with us. If anything, the schism has gotten worse in recent years. Snow was concerned about the failure of academic humanists to comprehend the insights of science. Today we have hundreds of postmodern academics who are actually *proud* of their failure to comprehend the insights of science – a pride in which they are so noisy and articulate and persuasive that they make someone like me feel slightly ashamed to be caught using a phrase like "the insights of science."

The wonderful hoax that Alan Sokal perpetrated six years ago in the pages of *Social Text* – feeding the postmodernists' catechism back to them in a form that so flattering that they didn't recognize it as a parody – points up the essential bankruptcy of the contemporary "science studies" movement. When Swift published "A Modest Proposal," most educated people understood that he was being satiric. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Sokal's "Transgressing the Boundaries" and the faculty of Duke University, the wellspring of *Social Text*.

Bronowski liked to point out that science is "a very human activity." I think he meant that it's a mistake to regard science as a sterile, passionless, bureaucratic pursuit, destined to turn us into numbers. But the postmoderns have distorted Bronowski's idea – as they have distorted similar ideas drawn from Thomas Kuhn and Karl Popper – beyond recognition, turning science into a mere "metaphor" or "narrative." Bronowski was inviting humanists to join in the great post-Enlightenment conversation about the limitations and misuses of scientific knowledge. And the humanists, to their eternal shame, responded by declaring that the Enlightenment was dead.

The success of the Sokal hoax makes me especially sad because we *do* need a serious critique of science in this culture. The apologists for the technocratic machine must be countered and contradicted. But this will never happen by filtering science through the bizarre epistemologies of French intellectuals. Jacques Derrida didn't discover the threat

to the ozone layer. Scientists did. (Their names, for the record, were F. Sherwood Rowland and Mario Molina of the University of California.)

FLJ: Your writing has been called everything from "irreverent" to "blasphemous." How would you characterize your writing and, given Salman Rushdie's fate, does this vehemence affect your writing or personal behavior?

JM: Obviously a whole book could be written about the Rushdie affair and the differences between Western and Islamic perceptions of fiction and its power over reality. (In fact, whole books *have* been written about these matters.) On the whole, I don't imagine myself becoming the next Rushdie – I don't fear reprisals from Christian militants. At this point in history, theological satire in the West flies well below the radar of the religious right. There's no need for me to put a barbed-wire fence around my house.

Occasionally, a born-again Christian with a powerful search engine will blunder into my website. The poor fellow has typed in "Jesus," and suddenly he's confronted with reviews of *Only Begotten Daughter*. Usually he'll leave me a message – disapproving, but hardly menacing. It goes something like this: "Well, Jim, I can see by this website that you're very concerned with religious matters. Did you know that Jesus Christ is very concerned about your concern with religious matters? I suggest you let him into your heart, preferably before sundown, lest you roast in Hell. Have a nice day."

Believe it or not, I sometimes wonder if my relentless railing against Christianity doesn't go too far. At a certain point, obviously, any sort of blasphemy can become hurtful, irrelevant, or puerile. But I keep coming back to this question: who struck first, the satirist or the sacristan? And the answer is clearly, the latter.

We *must* be angry about Christianity's historical complicity in war, slavery, anti-Semitism, and the subjugation of women. God knows, that's not *all* we should be angry about. Secular belief systems also have much to answer for – maybe they even have *more* to answer for. I don't know. But it's my particular job to keep shouting, "Look where the theistic-salvationist worldview leads us if we're not careful!"

FLJ: Did you ever write a line that you're especially proud of – that is, a line in which you managed to capture your worldview in epigrammatic fashion?

JM: Yes. Ready? Here goes. In *Towing Jehovah*, my heroine says to a friend of hers, "That maxim, 'There are no atheists in foxholes,' it's not an argument against atheism – it's an argument against foxholes."

Author's Note: Since this interview in 2000, [Mr. Morrow](#) has published The Last Witchfinder a rollicking, satiric, picaresque, and sometimes bawdy historical novel about

the clash between Renaissance theology and Enlightenment science. Portions of this interview appeared in:

- ["Interview: James Morrow"](#) in *Strange Horizons*, 2001
- "Provocative Blasphemies: An Interview with Satirist James Morrow" in *Space and Time Magazine*, 2001
- "Five Questions for James Morrow" in *Inkspot.com*, 2001
- "Provocative Blasphemies Part I: James Morrow on Melding Science Fiction and Theology" in *iUniverse.com*, 2000
- "Provocative Blasphemies Part II: James Morrow on his World View" in *iUniverse.com*, 2000