

Lique-Fiction

Marc Weidenbaum

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Science fiction writers **Richard Kadrey**, **Pat Murphy** and **Rudy Rucker** discuss remixing reality

Shortly after I moved back to San Francisco from New Orleans in 2003, I sat down with three science-fiction writers to talk about two parallel topics, how both San Francisco and science fiction had hit a glass window called reality.

*For the city at the time, it was life post-boom, after the Internet bubble had collapsed. **Richard Kadrey** (Kamikaze L'Amour, Metrophage), **Pat Murphy** (The City, Not Long After; The Falling Woman) and **Rudy Rucker** (Freeware, The Hollow Earth) joined me for Memphis-style barbecue in the Lower Haight to discuss earthquakes and cyberpunk, Sputnik and the Holodeck, the Gold Rush and bioengineering. The interview was published the following year with the title "Local Forecasters" in a magazine called Big, a gorgeous, glossy, single-issue tribute to San Francisco.*

The city's economy has improved somewhat in the years since, and though science fiction hasn't necessarily found the next cyberpunk, it may be all the better for the absence of a unifying force. Sci-fi flourishes in print and on screen. I'm posting this story on Disquiet.com because in essence what Kadrey, Murphy and Rucker come to focus on during the conversation is how some of the most trenchant, compelling and oracular science fiction is actually a funhouse-mirror vision of current-day reality — a remix, if you will.

As Rucker says, "[Y]ou feel like you're transmuting your life in real time." The interview appears here in slightly edited and expanded form.

I served as associate editor on that San Francisco issue of Big. If you can locate a copy, other music-related content includes a beautiful photo essay by Michael Martin, with images from inside the home studios of Jack Dangers (aka Meat Beat Manifesto) and Crack MC, and the recording studios Tiny Telephone and the Plant.

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Three San Francisco area science fiction novelists talk about what comes next

On a sunny autumn afternoon in San Francisco, three local science fiction novelists met to eat barbecue and discuss the Bay Area's future. The author Richard Kadrey organized the lunch with two of his award-winning colleagues: Pat Murphy, who writes science fiction when she isn't at her day job at the city's Exploratorium science museum, and Rudy Rucker, who wrote science fiction when he wasn't teaching computer science at San Jose State. (He has since retired from teaching, and is writing more than ever.)

All three have set some of their fiction in the Bay Area, transforming the region with speculative technology, or devastating it with mind-boggling apocalypses. On its surface, the predicament facing the area today is more fiscal than fantastic, a matter of economic reality: all that prosperity having evaporated so suddenly, following the bursting of the Internet bubble.

As such, life here post-boom has something in common with science fiction itself, which has come up hard against a glass window called reality. Now that so many sci-fi conceits (camera phones, wi-fi, computer viruses) are yesterday's news, the genre must figure out what comes next. All the more reason to ask the question of our three professional oracles: Where did the future go?

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Revising Predictions: Updated Futures

Marc Weidenbaum: What do you make of this parallel, that San Francisco and science fiction are trying to figure out what's next?

Richard Kadrey: Both SFs are in the process of an outwardly imposed self-examination. You can't define the city by the recent Internet boom, but that period had a profound effect. We're watching the tech biz come out of a stormy adolescence. Science fiction is dealing with daily life stuck on fast-forward. We're re-writing both the map of the world and our own genes. How can you write about life 20 or 100 years from now when you know that by Christmas some event or research is going to shake up your whole worldview?

Pat Murphy: Somebody wanted to republish my first novel, *The Shadow Hunter*, which I had written 20 some years ago, and I realized that the future in the novel was severely dated. I couldn't allow them to republish it unless I updated the future, which was weird. The story is the same, but that old future was now a past.

Rudy Rucker: I just had a similar experience with my novel *The Hacker and the Ants*, which came out around 1992. The publisher Four Walls Eight Windows reprinted it this year. I said I'd like to tweak it a little, because it was talking about cyberspace and virtual reality. I also added to the title. It's now called *The Hacker and the Ants, Release 2.0*.

Murphy: It was a very odd experience reading my old work and realizing how dated it was, because I remember reading science fiction writers from the '50s and going, "Their future has nothing to do with the future." Suddenly I was in the same situation.

Kadrey: William Gibson recently said that his novel *Neuromancer* reads like a really clever book from the '40s. Even he feels a certain datedness.

Rucker: Well, the '50s vision of the future is the *Star Trek* future, where everyone wears grey pajamas and everything's clean.

Kadrey: Everything's uniform.

Rucker: Everybody has a fucking British accent. That's one of the nice things that cyberpunk did, with *Blade Runner*, the *Terminator* movies — the future being dark and dirty, more engaging.

Murphy: I've been pissed off that I don't have my Buck Rogers jetpack yet.

Kadrey: We are living in such an unbelievably different world than any of us anticipated. I was born the year Sputnik went up, I grew up in the Space Age, and was promised such a different world. The thing that frightens me is that J.G. Ballard may be the great visionary; he basically said the future will be boring. I think we're living in the boring future. When the

web first showed up it was a freakish thing. It was full of lunatics. Now, it's the taming of the digital west.

Rucker: I think it's a nice thing about the web that anyone who wants to can put up whatever they want, and it's pretty easy.

Murphy: One of the things I just love about it is if you're looking for wacky writing about any topic, you can find it without leaving your desk. In fact, you can waste a whole lot of writing time.

Weidenbaum: Rudy and Pat, do you share Richard's disappointment?

Rucker: I think I don't feel that disappointed in the future. I never thought I'd live to the 21st century. To me it's cool that we're in the 21st century. It's pretty bad that the country is run by Nazis, and it's amazing that people so consistently vote against their own self-interest. You think by now people would be a little more enlightened about preserving the environment. I usually try not to think about politics too much because it makes me unhappy. So I focus on more fun things to think about — weird science, weird math.

Murphy: I wouldn't characterize it as disappointment. I'm more surprised by it. I have a different experience than Richard does with the web. A lot of the projects I do at the Exploratorium I couldn't have done 10 years ago, because I do so much research online. The Exploratorium has been involved in the web since early on. Back in the days of Mosaic [the early web browser] we had an exhibit where you could log on to Mosaic, clunk around and look at things that there wasn't much of. But I remember even early on people were going, "Someday you'll be looking up recipes on this." "Oh yeah, right." And now it's, "I need a recipe for roast beef that involves rosemary," and there it is. It's just amazing.

Rucker: The science fiction in the '50s, the dream of space travel — that hasn't panned out because nobody's come up with any compelling reason to be out there. As Vonnegut once said, "People used to think Earth was just a piece of shit that we could use up and leave behind." But until we get our faster-than-light-speed drives, Gaia is all we get. And then the thing was artificial intelligence, and cyberspace, and virtual reality. And that all to some extent has come through, and people are a little burnt on hearing about it. I think genomics and biotechnology is clearly one of the — it hasn't been well worked-over.

Weidenbaum: Similarly, many people feel that biotech is the next economic hope for the Bay Area.

Rucker: Well, Genentech has a big campus here.

Kadrey: And nanotech. They have this huge publicity machine here now. I have a sample copy of a nanotech investment newsletter, specifically for hi-tech entrepreneurs.

Rucker: Remember in the Gold Rush, the people who got rich were the guys who started hardware stores.

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Mirror, Mirror: Everyday Reality as Muse

Weidenbaum: As I've gotten older, I no longer read science fiction as predictive. I now see it as a lens through which I view the current world.

Rucker: Yes, I think that's true about science fiction. Some people have said *1984*, which was written in 1948 — that's what it was about. And it is always just a way to get a little distance on the present by kind of backing off into the science-fiction world. We are almost always writing about the present.

Weidenbaum: Rudy, sequences in your *Freeware* series take place in India. Those resonate today because of concerns about offshore computing.

Rucker: I have a lot of Indian students, I teach computer science, and I knew that Bangalore is a programming center, so it was natural to set it there.

Kadrey: But I don't think in the biz it was yet an issue. Now programmers are finding themselves out of work because between India and Vietnam, there is a whole class of ultra-educated people who for 300 bucks a month —

Rucker: We still make up most of the algorithms. In this area, we still have leadership, and I don't think we're in much danger of losing that.

Weidenbaum: This idea that science fiction is more mirror than telescope, is that something you knew when you first started writing?

Murphy: It's something I started becoming really aware of when Richard and I co-taught a science fiction course down at UC Santa Cruz. Richard did a great lecture where he used clips from different movies and talked about how you can see fear of women, fear of the youth, you could see all of these things, and they were reflecting what was going on at the time.

Kadrey: Everything in the '50s was about the bomb in some way or another.

Weidenbaum: Are there comparable themes today?

Rucker: I have this word I use, "transrealism," to indicate that science fiction is not surrealism, but it's realism transmuted. You're taking the science fiction tools and using them to stand for things — telepathy stands for the dream of being fully understood, time travel for nostalgia and regret. There's a phrase you used to hear more in the '70s or '80s, people might still say it: "The future isn't what it used to be." We had this *Brave New World* vision of the future, but again it was just the '50s thing: TV dinners, consumerism, sleeping in pods, making love to a robot.

Murphy: All the important things.

Kadrey: I don't know how much people are conscious as they're doing it.

Murphy: I think when you're writing fiction you're aware of, like, 10 percent of what you're doing. You might be aware you're doing 10 percent, but the other 90 percent you realize when you look at it 20 years later.

Rucker: When you're creating art at the top of your abilities, you're kind of using every bit of computational power you have, and you're not able to simulate that computation, because it's the biggest thing your system can run. If you're doing something trivial, like making some dinky little short one-page story, you can simulate the whole process and stand outside of it, but when you're fully engaged, of necessity you can't. That's what Pat is saying, where

you think you're in control, but you only really control 10 percent. I sometimes use the term "full-court press." I'm just using everything that happens to me, all day long, whatever I see, whatever I hear — bam! — that goes in. That's, to me, the most pleasant form of writing, because then you feel like you're transmuting your life in real time.

Kadrey: It's like there's this overarching story, and you know where this story you're writing goes, but you had this weird thing happen at the donut shop that morning, and suddenly the donut shop gets folded in.

Rucker: And when it's really going good, it's almost like the universe will put things in your way. I think of the magpie flying around, seeing shiny scraps and taking them back to the nest. The universe will get into it and say, "This is good what you're doing — look over there." The universe is dancing with you.

Weidenbaum: Your fiction also provides a filter through which readers view reality.

Murphy: Well, one goal is to get people to see the world the way I see it.

Rucker: It's a type of immortality. There's a made-up word I use. I say I'm "twinking" an author when I'm studying them so much that I start to see through their eyes, and become them.

Kadrey: Which is why I'm suspicious of some of these new attempts at electronic storytelling, like group fictions that are started online, where the idea is there is no author, or the original author gives up ownership to some larger narrative.

Weidenbaum: Rudy, you teach game programming. Has the rise of verisimilitude in games become a conflict for you as a novelist.

Rucker: One of the interesting things to try and do is imagine an art form in, like, one thousand years, that would be something people might be doing instead of writing novels —

Kadrey: And it's not the *Star Trek* Holodeck.

Rucker: You know, the truth is, I've never watched *Star Trek*. It came after my own personal SF-imprinting period, ages 12 to 14. I'll have some cool SF idea, and tell it to someone, and they're like, Yeah, I saw that on *Star Trek*, it's no big deal. Those putty-faced TV actors, man, making my dreams so ordinary. I'm assuming the Holodeck is ordinary. Anyway, back to the art of the year 3000. At present — when you're writing, you can just build this thing. I want a giant paramecium the size of a city, and bam, I write three lines and I've got it. If I want that in a [video] game, well that's a little bit of programming. It's a very stiff medium, recalcitrant, very hard to create a game at the present time. But maybe in Y3K you can talk story into film at home for free.

Weidenbaum: Do games threaten science fiction's grip on our imagination.

Rucker: No, not at all. Games are emergent, like an artificial life form. You really need to experiment, time things, see what works. A game can't spring full blown from your brow. That's the one thing I learned in teaching game programming. Novels, to some extent, are like that. A novel may take four run-throughs, which is a lot. You gotta nail it. I've done it just in two, sometimes three.

Apocalypse When: Geological Destiny

Kadrey: For me the thing that makes San Francisco unique is that we're waiting for the catastrophe. I honestly believe this plays into the ethos of the city.

Murphy: Tsunamis!

Kadrey: We're going to have liquefaction. There's a good chance of us just being gone.

Rucker: I remember Pat got a geological map —

Murphy: One of the reasons I live in [the] Bernal Heights [neighborhood].

Rucker: They have good rock.

Murphy: Bedrock.

Weidenbaum: In Richard's *Kamikaze L'Amour* and Pat's *The City, Not Long After*, San Francisco recovers from near-apocalypse.

Murphy: I think in the case of *City, Not Long After*, I wanted a situation in which the artists had taken over. And in order to do that I had to clear the decks, so we can have a nice clean slate, and a lot of resources, and paint the Golden Gate Bridge blue, create Stonehenge out of refrigerators, do whatever we want all over the city.

Weidenbaum: So your apocalypse was a kind of positive wish-fulfillment?

Murphy: Yes. Another element in writing *The City, Not Long After*, was working at the Exploratorium, which is an enclave of artists and oddballs and renegade scientists, people with a lot of theories. One of my friends who worked at the Exploratorium was reading the novel and she was laughing. I said, "What part are you reading?" She said, "It's an Exploratorium staff meeting." The artists were deciding what to do about the army that was invading from Sacramento; they all had theories about how to handle it. So, yeah, the apocalypse was to clean the place up.

Weidenbaum: So in *Kamikaze*, Richard, in which the Amazon jungle metastasizes all the way north to San Francisco — that was another way to wreak havoc?

Kadrey: The slow-motion earthquake. There's two ways to look at a catastrophe: the quick and the slow. The ice-age novel is the slow catastrophe, a *fait accompli*.

Weidenbaum: So much science fiction reacts to or builds up to a crisis.

Kadrey: That's Susan Sontag: "Science fiction is the literature of catastrophe." We're living in a catastrophe zone. It's part of the air here. Like L.A., we're the end of the world, as far west as you can go without falling into the water. The difference geologically is that probably we're going to go first. We're on more of a time bomb.

Murphy: One of the other things about San Francisco is the geographic constraint. If you want to leave San Francisco, you either use the bridge, or there's a very narrow neck of land. The constraint of being packed into this one area of land, and you can't have suburban sprawl, it really does sort of shape the character of the city.

Kadrey: San Francisco is definitely a town where you feel the future rushing toward you at every moment. The fact we're on a fault line is part of it. The fact we're willing to try anything here is another reason. We're a city of early adopters, willing to try whatever shiny new lifestyle or gadget catches our eye. This makes S.F. a versatile and exciting place. It also makes us a bit flighty. We don't have the gravity of, say, a New York. This is neither good nor bad. The old cities of the Northeast are the final outposts of old Europe in the New World. The further west you get, the more the volume gets cranked up, the more the landscape flattens out into what we think of as American. L.A. is one version of that American Extremis, the landscape on crystal meth. San Francisco is another version. The landscape here is probably on Ecstasy.

The above story originally appeared, in lightly edited form, in issue 54 of Big magazine (bigmagazine.com).

Related links :

Richard Kadrey's entry at the Internet Speculative Fiction database, isfdb.org.

Pat Murphy's website, brazenhussies.net/murphy.

Rudy Rucker's website, rudyrucker.com.

Disquiet.com is a publication on the Internet that consists of reflections on ambient/electronic music, and interviews with the people who make it. It is updated most weekdays and sometimes on weekends, and its contents include *conversations* with people involved in electronic music (composers, musicians, record-label folk, programmers, etc.), as well as *essays* and reviews of music (live and recorded), an ongoing bibliography project (called *Page-spotter*), news items, an index of *audio-games* (computer programs that blur the line between toys and instruments), links to related websites (filed in the *Elsewhere* department), and more. It is run by **Marc Weidenbaum**, who is an editor and writer.

The site's name honors **Fernando Pessoa** (1888 – 1935), the late Portuguese poet. Son of a music critic, illuminator of the everyday, loner, futurist — he is as good a patron saint of electronic music as the burgeoning genre could ask for.

Supporting himself as a clerk, the early-20th-century equivalent of a McJob, Pessoa toiled in willful solitude like today's electronic musicians, who tend to compose alone in their bedrooms. Also like today's electronic musicians, Pessoa employed numerous pseudonyms to concentrate distinct, and often opposed, aspects of his creativity. In fact, one could say these pseudonyms — heteronyms, actually — employed, or possessed, him.

The Book of Disquiet (or *Disquietude*, in the less common translation) is the title of an autobiography Pessoa wrote for one of his many egos, "Bernardo Soares, assistant book-keeper in the city of Lisbon." It is a work rich with lucid dreams, more a compendium of fragments than a direct narrative; it comprised but a portion of the 25,426 literary items Pessoa left in a *trunk* when he died.

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