

John Elkington talks to sci-fi great **David Brin**

Repairing the World



David Brin with the Terracotta Army

We welcome one of the world's top science fiction authors for our third interview. His novels have been *New York Times* bestsellers, winning multiple Hugo, Nebula and other awards. At least a dozen have been translated into more than 20 languages—and his 1985 novel, *The Postman*, was made into a film starring Kevin Costner.

Why David Brin?

Significantly for our focus on the Regenerative Economy, the main protagonist in *The Postman* is a survivor, a wanderer who trades tales for food and

shelter in the wake of a devastating war. Borrowing the uniform of a long-dead postman, he discovers the uniform's power as a symbol of hope—and begins to weave his greatest tale, of a nation on the road to recovery.

For us, the most interesting Green Swan trend in what follows is the expansion of human horizons through speculative fiction—and the investigation of the unintended consequences of science and technology.

Near the end of our conversation, David begins to explore the Judaic concept of *Tikkun Olam*, which encourages “repairing the world.” This is a task to which he has long bent his efforts in his writing, public speaking and advisory work with major corporations and organizations like the CIA, the U.S. Department of Defense and NASA.



John Elkington: Immense thanks for agreeing to do this interview, David. As you know, we are developing a Green Swans Observatory to follow on from my 2020 book, *Green Swans*, which you've seen. The idea is to scan for examples of technologies, business models, cultural developments and so on that have the potential to generate exponential solutions. That's something science fiction has been doing for over 100 years.

So, to kick off, and given that you were born (in 1950) a year after me, I wanted to start with a question about your experience of life to date. How do you feel about the time you've grown up in and become what you've become? Were you lucky or unlucky?

David Brin: Oh, spectacularly lucky. As background, I should point out that, while only 10% of science fiction authors are scientifically trained, as I am, I put a lot of science into my fiction. It is not just wild and woolly literary fantasy. That said, some of the best "hard" science fiction is written by former history majors—among them Greg Bear, Nancy Kress, Sheila Finch, and Kim Stanley Robinson. And that's because what's essential to science fiction is discussion of the human condition and the possibilities of change.

It should have been called "speculative history" rather than science fiction, because we speculate on the great story—humanity's gradual climb, three steps forward, 10 to the side, two steps back. Sometimes thwarted by the best of intentions of ancestors who had the wrong ideas, and were faithful in devotedly and lovingly enforcing them, holding us back.

And, you know, one of the deep concerns of science fiction—and of people like you, John—is what mistakes are we making today? Mistakes that in the future will have people wondering why we failed to achieve the number one goal of any decent person, to be good ancestors.

'WHAT MISTAKES ARE WE MAKING TODAY? MISTAKES THAT IN THE FUTURE WILL HAVE PEOPLE WONDERING WHY WE FAILED TO ACHIEVE THE NUMBER ONE GOAL OF ANY DECENT PERSON: TO BE GOOD ANCESTORS.'

JE: What got you started?

DB: I trained as an astrophysicist and still do some of that. But I knew that I would be a writer because I was born into a family of writers, even if I tried to escape into science. My father took me to see Einstein play the violin when I was for three or four, but even at that age, apparently, it rocked me. I saw Sputnik go overhead. And I remember that too.



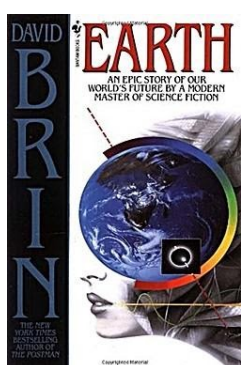


DB (cont.): The effect of all this was profound because I realised several things. One, that the greatest scientists have artistic side-lines, so science doesn't stop you from doing art. When I was at Caltech, I realised that people like Richard Feynman and Murray Gell-Mann, they all had artistic side-lines. They were larger than the narrow stereotype of what a scientist is.

And the more history I studied, the more I realised we were doing something different, something special. At last, after all of that grinding horror of the Mesolithic, and the Neolithic, we had islands of light like Pericles' Athens and Da Vinci's Florence. Brief escapes from, you know, machismo, the feudal cultures—in which a few at the top took everything from those below. Preventing them from applying the cleansing light of criticism, or their own talents, to move humanity forward.

But now we had a chance—and I wanted to be part of that. So that's why I fled into science. Along the way, though, I had this artistic hobby. And in my case, my art was writing stories. And there came a point in time, around halfway through my postdoc, when society made it very, very clear which of those two

things it wanted me to emphasise. Civilization would pay me much more—and give me more pats on the head and more prestige—for my positive morality tales than it ever was going to do for the much harder work of science.

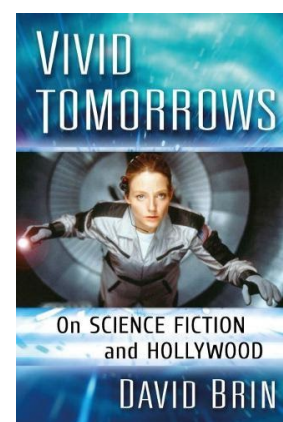


JE: You made the right choice! Partly because much of the science that goes into “hard” science fiction is itself hard: physics, chemistry, IT, AI. We also need biology, ecology. The first book of yours I read was *Earth*, first published in 1990. Already you were covering environmental issues: global warming, the levees breaking, environmental refugees. There's a lot more of that now in books like Kim Stanley Robinson's *2140* or *The Ministry For The Future*, but it was rare then.

I told you that the first science fiction author I met, another rarity in that books like *Dune* and *The Green Brain* had strong ecological themes, was Frank Herbert. I interviewed him back in [1981](#). He felt an outlier with those themes, albeit a very successful one! Did you feel the same?

DB: Well, I was certainly not the first in science fiction or literature to warn about ecological problems. Among those who did, my niche was a slightly more optimistic one. Even so, some people took *Earth* as a dire warning. Yes, overall, in the grand scheme of things, it was an early ecological warning novel, but again, not as dire as say *Soylent Green*, or a movie like, you know, *Silent Running*.

In fact, one of the themes I talk about in my new nonfiction book, *Vivid Tomorrows*, which focuses on Hollywood's coverage of sci-fi themes, is the self-preventing prophecy. Those ecological novels I spoke of, and the movies that were made from them, recruited millions of environmentalists.





DB (cont.): If we squeak by it will be because millions of people have been trying to get the world's attention. I've been a member of the Sierra Club since around 1965. Dire warnings like *The China Syndrome* drew attention to things that might have gone much worse otherwise—although Chernobyl and Fukushima were bad. Movies about pandemics should have made us more prepared than we were. And there's every reason to believe that this pandemic is much milder than we've seen in science fiction.



War Room with Big Board, from 1964's *Dr Strangelove*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (image via Wikipedia)

Then there is the long list of science fiction movies and books that might have saved us from nuclear war. *Dr. Strangelove*, *On The Beach*, *Fail Safe*, and the growing number of war games. They all took different potential ways that accidental nuclear war might happen. At the time, the generals claimed, “Oh no, that's ridiculous!” Then, when retired, they wrote books saying, “Oh, we really sweated over that!”

But the granddaddy of all self-preventing prophecies is undoubtedly George Orwell's *1984*. Which scared the living bejesus out of hundreds of millions of people—and propelled many of them to dedicate part of their lives to preventing it from happening. Now, it's an ironic thing, because in normal times, the anti-Orwellian reflex of someone on the left is to say, ‘Big Brother is coalescing before our eyes, amid the *aristocracy*, the *oligarchy*, the rich and faceless corporations!’ If you're somewhat to the right, or libertarian, the reflex is to say ‘Big Brother is forming among *snooty academics* and faceless government *bureaucrats*!’





DB (cont.): In normal times, when we listen to each other at least a little bit, this manifests as guarding each other's backs. You know, I believe my elites are more trustworthy than yours, but you're welcome to yell at and criticise mine, just in case I'm wrong.

The worst thing that has been done to our civilization in the last 20 years by our enemies has been the end of this synergy. The result is we get many hundreds of millions of people assuming that their elites are completely safe—and the other side's are criminal.

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JE: So what's the progression there? I mean, you studied civilizations in history, presumably enough to get a sense of the underlying rhythms and trends?

DB: Oh, yes, I believe you see it in the all-out effort that oligarchs have been making the last 10 years or so to create a push against the skilled castes in Western civilization. And if you look at right wing propaganda, especially also with some islands on the left as well, the fundamental thing is not racism. The fundamental thing is not xenophobia. Instead the fundamental thing is the preaching of anomie and hatred toward the skilled professions, toward the people who know stuff, toward the very idea that facts are verifiable things.

Objective reality itself is a notion that is directly under attack. And there's a simple, simple reason for this. These facts and skilled professions are precisely what blocks the path to any resumption of feudalism, any resumption of extreme pyramidal power structures. These historical horrors can't be reactivated so long as society and citizens have some trust in the fact-using expert castes. That's why the fact-using expert castes are the targets of almost all of the propaganda that we see coming from oligarchies around the world, ranging from communists, despots and kings to mafia clans and casino moguls.

They've all joined in this—and, counter-intuitively, it's actually good news. Because I believe that this cabal would not be so frantic if they did not see the writing on the wall!

Much of that writing on the wall is coming from Hollywood. The memes that have been spread by Hollywood for at least 70 years, perhaps more like 100 now, have progressively pushed us toward several lessons that I point out in my book. Suspicion of authority is the central one. It's being used against us now, but it is fundamentally a very, very positive meme—and you see this in pretty much every film that you've ever enjoyed.

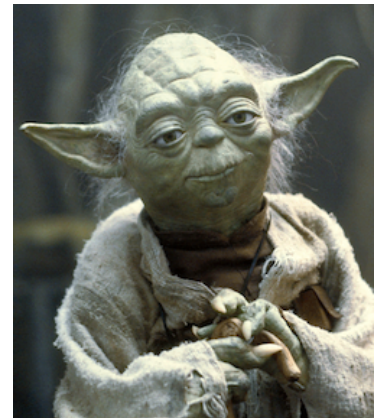
JE: Having read *Vivid Tomorrows*, it's clear you don't have much time for the *Star Wars* franchise!





DB: No, I don't. George Lucas pushed truly, truly horrible lessons. And there's not one single lesson that's preached by that horrible green oven mitt Yoda that's not potentially filled with evil. But that's an aside!

Hollywood preaches suspicion of authority, tolerance, diversity, eccentricity. At the beginning of any film, the hero or heroine usually exhibits some eccentric trait. And that helps the audience bond with her, despite the fact that it may not be your eccentric trait. So if this process is allowed to continue much longer, then the very notion of a pyramidal social structure will just be completely nonsensical to a large fraction of the earth's population.



"The green oven mitt, Yoda": not David Brin's sci-fi favorite character (source: Wikipedia)

JE: But you read science fiction from around the world, and you relish Chinese science fiction. Will science fiction have a similar corrosive effect on Chinese hierarchies?

DB: Well, there's a picture of [Liu Cixin](#) and me posing in front of that painting behind me. I helped promote his book *The Three Body Problem*. He's wonderful. And I think that the renaissance of wonderful stories coming out of Asia is a tremendous contribution to the literature of change—and criticism.

Science fiction has gone global. I participated early in the '80s, and '90s, in searching for islands of science fiction in Africa, India, and Asia, and Eastern Europe. But it's gained so much momentum now, they don't need me anymore. You know, straight white male! But I help wherever I can.

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JE: Let me push back a bit on that. One of your ideas, which I found magical, is TASAT. A universal database of speculative fiction, where you could dip your bucket into the well of collective wisdom on how to think about and solve the world's biggest problems. Where did that come from—and where's it headed?

DB: I'm one of a couple of dozen science fiction authors who have been consulted by government agencies for years. It's nice to know that many skilled professional protectors and members of the protector caste know they don't have the imagination to look beyond the one or two year threat horizon that they're obsessed with daily. For far too long that was angry young men, you know, terrorism. It ignored the rise of very different international threats.





For more on TASAT (There's a Story About That) [click here](#)

DB (cont.): As it happens, this is the first year in the last six that I have not spoken at the CIA, chastising them for missing this or asking them if they are missing that! But when I do speak to them I can tell from the smiles on some of their faces whether—or not—they're missing the things I'm finger wagging them about.

But I always mention the possibility of a database that they could consult in case something really weird happened. Let's say, prototypically, contact with an alien civilization, or some very, very weird thing is dug up at an archaeological dig. Or mole people come out of the ground ... I don't know. Mutations start happening, pandemics, things like that.

And I ask them, You are aware that for 100 years very smart people who knew about the technologies and problems of their day have projected them into the future? Have you scanned that fiction for clues on how to act now? To see if we could build a bridge between those two worlds?

So, several years ago, I helped to establish the Arthur C. Clarke Centre for Human Imagination at UCSD. And one of our projects was to create this database called TASAT. It stands for "There's A Story About That." We got it started a couple of years ago, but it got spammed, just wasn't the right design. So it is being redesigned now. However, I do invite folks to drop by and at least read the perfectly functional introductory part of the site. It can be found at tasat.ucsd.edu. Or, on Twitter, [tas@ucsd.edu](https://twitter.com/tas@ucsd.edu). John will insert the link, I'm sure. And you can get on the list to be informed when it activates. Nerdy readers welcome!

JE: We will—and I really want to see TASAT fly! Meanwhile, I have one final question for you, quite a personal one. And it may be off track, because I got the background from Wikipedia. I learned to be wary of Wikipedia—much though I love it and use it—years ago when someone told me I had a Danish wife in my profile. Let's just say that Elaine, my wife of some 50 years, was slightly surprised! In any event, when I looked up your Wikipedia profile, it talked about the concept of *Tikkun Olam* in Judaic tradition. The idea of "repairing the world."





DB: Oh, yes. *Tikkun Olam*. If there are any theological types out there, there's a monograph I've been working on, focusing on 16 modern questions about theology. It's not anti-religion, it just goes into more of a science fictional set of questions about theology.

So maybe God is not entirely omnipotent? Maybe he/she made the world and is willing to abide by the simulation—and see what comes out of it? Either because of a lack of total omnipotence or because they are interested in how the experiment is going to go. So perhaps the world's creator now needs human help? The world itself must be our focus, not the individual soul. The soul can take care of itself.

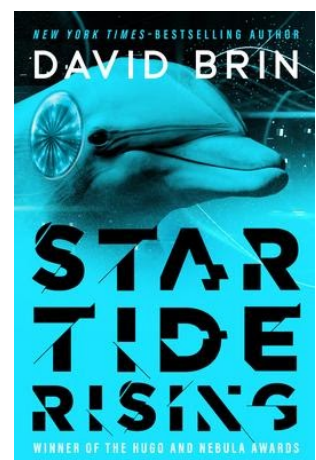
We don't have to keep begging, begging, begging, begging, begging for salvation, That's something we'll earn—or we won't. Obsession with the individual soul is one of the things that you find across a great many religions, but not in *Tikkun Olam*. The notion there is that we have duties, and one of these duties is to this world. If we don't repair what we can repair, that's sin.

For most of the time *Tikkun Olam* was discussed, it was a moral thing to do what you can to be a decent person, at a time when we did not have technological power to affect the world itself. Now we do. We must evolve *Tikkun Olam* from simply encouraging people to be good to physically trying to repair the world—because our species is picking up the tools of creation even as we speak. The whole reason these vaccines have suddenly appeared, when the process used to take 15 years, is because we are picking up those tools of creation.

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JE: Speaking of 15 years, I have been saying that I suspect that the next 10-15 years of my working life will be the most exciting, challenging and politically dangerous to date. Oddly, I feel I'm just getting started. So where are you in all of this? What do you still want to achieve, David?

DB: Oh, well, you know, I'm a whole lot younger than you, John. By 10-11 months! And like you I've got tons to do. I'd like to do more science. I'd like to get back to really big novels. I came out with a science fiction comedy that some people think is as funny as Pratchett, but then again others think I'm insane. I'm developing a series of novels for young adults, science fiction that tries to bring optimism back into this *Hunger Games*-infected world. My nonfiction book, *Vivid Tomorrows*, which I mentioned, is keeping me busy—as is reissuing all my *Uplift* books, about the plight of refugees.



The second in the first Uplift trilogy, *Star Tide Rising*, published in 1981

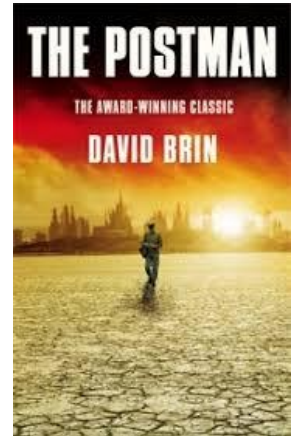




DB (cont.): All these revivals made me suddenly realise something interesting. My first character ever, in a murder mystery set on the Sun, was half African and half Native American. Native American themes figure in at least four of my five first novels. And the central *Uplift* character is called Robert One Eagle. It's something we straight white males have to say now and then—that we've been in this fight, forever. I'm on the right side! So please, cut me some slack for looking like this!

JE: If the future had some say, David, I imagine it would cut you more than a little slack. I have loved this exchange, but I promised you we would be done within 45 minutes—even if I could go on for 45 hours or 45 days. Immense thanks. And, as we wind down, and even if I suspect you're not going to answer this, is there one book that distils your thinking?

DB: No, I mean, which of your children is your favourite child? But if I was forced to do this it would probably be the one that is in 25 languages, because of the Kevin Costner film. It's the one that makes more people cry, makes them feel renewed dedication to saving this civilization. It's *The Postman*. If you don't like it, I will personally pay your money back!



JE: Well, you've renewed my dedication.

DB: Thank you immensely, John—you are working very, very hard for all of us. Your book *Green Swans* is marvellous. My son read it, too, and normally he doesn't read that sort of thing! I have promoted it online and will continue to do so. Tell me when the interview is out and I'll do the same.

