

SLF Portolan Project

Interview with Paolo Bacigalupi

Dublin, Ireland, August 2019

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hi everybody. I'm Mary Anne Mohanraj. I'm here with the Speculative Literature Foundation and we're talking with Paolo Bacigalupi. Did I say that right?

Paolo Bacigalupi: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Excellent. Paolo is the author of *The Windup Girl*, *Waterknife*, *Shipbreaker*, a host of other books, and the winner of multiple awards. But we are here to talk specifically about message fiction. It can be very challenging when you're writing around different political issues. A lot of Paolo's work is ecologically centered and being able to address the issues, some of which can be quite dark, in a way that doesn't come off as a polemic, as a lecture, the way you might if you were writing a non-fiction piece. So Paolo's hopefully gonna help us see some of the ways he's approached that.

Paolo Bacigalupi: Yeah so the bulk of the work that I've done over the last, you know, ten years has been specifically around different sort of, I guess you can call it values fiction, is kind of the way I think about it. And I've been interested in trying to illustrate, you know, what I think is important in the world. And one of the things that is really fascinating to me about values fiction is how bad it tends to be. And how either basic, obvious, or didactic you come off. I feel like one of the things I notice a lot when I'm talking to people who are writing values fiction is they're saying "The Man's keeping me down, they don't understand, like they don't get me, they don't see the problem with the world, or they don't take it seriously." And almost always there's a moment where we put the responsibility for that on the editor who's rejecting us or the publishing house or whatever. Or the society at large who doesn't appreciate our values. And a while back I started thinking that there's this fundamental truth in publishing which is that this is a commercial operation. They need to print x numbers of books and they need to sell them. And so it's a units game. In fact, the first novel I ever wrote, which was rejected along with four others,

Mary Anne Mohanraj: [laughter] That's comforting.

Paolo Bacigalupi:

[laughter] Yeah yeah the other thing about writing about any other kind fiction. Keep going. Five novels later I finally get published. But that first novel that I sent out, the editor was like "I like this, I like the writing, I like a lot of things about it. It's way too dark; I can't take it." And you're like, oh, I just thought if I make the best book possible that was sufficient. And, you know, the fact that I checked all these boxes: good characters, good plot, good story, you know. But tonally I dragged them down into hell and left them there you know.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

I want to pause and ask a question here. So I'm finishing up a novel and in my workshop one of the persons who was looking at the opening, which has since been changed, it was a pretty dark opening right. And she was sort of saying "I would put this book down. It's just too depressing." She wanted something that had more potential of hope and light to be able to keep going. And I was pretty resistant to this. And then I ended up coming up with something, oh no, I like this version better than the one I did before. But if someone says I really need the dark opening, or need the whole book to be dark, I wonder whether you're willing to say I'm going to indie publish this or I'm gonna give it to a small press that's willing to take a chance on it. And I'm sort of accepting that that means I may get fifty readers and be done right.

Paolo Bacigalupi:

I think when you're talking about those kinds of things, what we're really talking about is values of writers basically and what you want to get out of your writing. So and as long as your behaviors are aligned with what you want to get out of your writing, then whatever you choose is correct, right? I want to stay absolutely true to my vision and I do not care about it's commercial potential, I do not care whether I only get ten readers but I am true to my vision, and that was the most important. That's a valid artistic choice. If you do that and then you complain that nobody loves your writing [laughter] well you know now you're not aligned. And so that's the question: do you want to be published in mass market, do you want to be on the front shelves of Barnes & Noble. And if you do-

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Well and if you have a message you're trying to get out-

Paolo Bacigalupi:

Right you may want to be read by more people. So if you do you may wanna try figuring out a way to have a conversation with these, you know, really commercial publishing houses. And so

going back to the idea of that first book that got rejected, it was like, oh, these guys are thinking, "I need to sell, I need to know I could sell five thousand copies, I need to sell ten thousand copies," or whatever the thing is. And that's the fear that the editor has where they're like "my job is on the line." So you're talking to that machine, where they're like, I need to be able to actually make a pitch and next year when I make another pitch people for them to believe me.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right.

Paolo Bacigalupi: So recognizing that, then you start thinking are there - In a lot of people I feel like sort of move into these camps where you could either be true to your art or you can be a commercial sell-out hack, you know, f****r. [Laughter] and this is all you've got. And to me it really was more like okay so this is the puzzle box that we're working with which is like I've got my values, there's the commercial space that I want to be in if I want to transmit my values. Is there some kind of win-win? And you're looking for that idea that there actually is, if you're a clever monkey, you can figure out the win-win scenario. And so a lot of my early work was trying to figure out what's my clever monkey version of like the win-win, where I get to talk about exactly things I want and the publishing houses are like "nom nom nom nom."

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So you and I had a conversation about five or six years ago where we just met and I had been- I was envious of the fact that in your career at that point you'd written *The Windup Girl*, and you'd written *Shipbreaker*, you seem to be working in multiple genres and styles. And I'm someone who has a new idea every five minutes and they don't all track into one easy marketing category. And I sort of came to you and I was like, how did you manage to be able- to be allowed to write all these different things and what you said at the time I think was that-

Paolo Bacigalupi: [laughter] I don't remember anything. No no go on. I deny it all. No unless it was smart, in which case I agree.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: You might not agree with it now or you might. But one thing that you said was that because *Windup Girl* was so commercially successful it ended up giving you more freedom with editors willing to take risks on some of your other work and giving you just more flexibility. And so maybe that sort of speaks to- I'm imagining

that someone paying attention to this would be thinking, “well do I want to compromise, find the win-win? Maybe that win-win also makes other things possible.” Right?

Paolo Bacigalupi:

Yes. No it’s actually true. I think it was probably about *Shipbreaker* actually. Because there was this thing where- speaking specifically about a book. So looking at something like *Shipbreaker*, I knew that I wanted to talk about sustainability, I knew that I wanted to talk about global warming, I knew I wanted to talk about resource depletion.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

But to teenagers.

Paolo Bacigalupi:

Right, I wanted to talk to kids about this thing. And so there’s my values, you know, and then there’s this idea- flat out, I’ll be honest, I want to earn a living too.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Right, got a family to support. [laughter]

Paolo Bacigalupi:

I like money, I don’t mind it. Like I’m a fan. So like how do I get my values and my money? And so one of those answers actually was specifically to think about writing for YA. That was a genre choice. And I heard people support themselves writing YA. People weren’t supporting themselves writing science fiction. And I was like, okay try this. Later on it turned out you could do it in science fiction too, but that was a surprise. But the thing was- then you’re looking at this idea, like what’s the- you know these are my values, but when you’re thinking about a teen reader or a kid reader it’s like, what are the other things you want to offer? For me, one of the things I was really interested in was reluctant readers. Readers who felt like books weren’t interesting to them, or weren’t exciting to them. And so I’m thinking “oh what’s the story I want to give here, not just what my message is but what’s the joy for you as a kid reading this you know?”

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

My son’s a reluctant reader until he encountered the Percy Jackson books. And he latched onto them incredibly hard and he listens to the audio books over and over and over again. And it’s really given him a passion for story, which is opening doors.

Paolo Bacigalupi:

Right yeah, and I did the same thing when I was writing *Zombie Baseball Beatdown*, which is a middle grade book. And I was interested in the same ideas, like how do you give the gift of story

and then talk about some big things. And what you're looking at in a lot of cases, with something like *Shipbreaker*, and also certainly in the adult world when I was writing something like *The Windup Girl*, I had values that I'm thinking about you know. I'm concerned about resource depletion. I'm concerned about global warming. The number one thing that I see going on when you write values fiction is that you tend to break things into a plot structure that's going to be the good guys versus the bad guys. And the good guys are gonna have the good values and the bad guys are gonna have the bad values. And automatically that structures you in a didactic space where there's not a lot of room for anybody to think or enjoy the book because they already know what's supposed to happen. So oftentimes what I'll do instead is- I'll try to make my environment make the argument about what my values are. So this is why I end up writing a lot of dystopian or broken worlds. I say okay, we've run out of resources and we didn't plan and we sort of let the poor all go and we just sort of say screw it. What's the future look like? And you sort of spin that out, you say sea levels have risen, New Orleans has been drowned, there's all these different things. And now you just get to tell a story not about, you know, who has the good values and who has the bad values, but a story about a kid just trying to survive in this world that, you know, we as adults in this present moment built. And so, you know, you don't have to have those characters say anything about - "Gosh, if only we recycled more. Gee if only we had-" You see, if only we had, like we wouldn't have given these kids this terrible, difficult life, tearing apart these old oil tankers.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Do you try and offer solutions? Because I feel like that's sometimes where I see message fiction going awry. So I think of Cory Doctorow right. And I love Cory's work in many ways. But I think on occasion his economic analyses- he has such a desire to see the working class triumph right, that sometimes I feel like it interferes with his stories, like for end of *For the Wind*. I found it implausible right, that all of these worker collectives ended up just triumphing over the, sorry spoilers, these massive corporations in a relatively easy manner. And so maybe if you could talk a little about how that - I don't even know - I'm trying to think if you even present solutions really.

Paolo Bacigalupi:

So I almost do it in the same way, that I do- I almost do it in the same exact way that I do, you know, present the problems, is that those things become background objects that populate the story.

So one of the things I was interested in *Shipbreaker*, I was interested in renewables and the opportunities of renewables. So, you know, it's really hard to write about how cool wind turbines are, [laughter], in a story. But, you know, wind is interesting. And I was interested in, okay, so what about a new age of sail. What if we had a new age of sail where we stopped using carbon to move goods and services around the world and instead went back to sail. And we had a global economy based on sail, and literally based on canvas and wooden boats. And so then you think, okay, what would the future be if you said we're gonna use sail, so it's gonna be low carbon, but it's gonna use all of our technology prowess. And so what would we build then? So we end up with clipper ships with high-altitude para sails or hydro coils or all these things. And suddenly you're sort of talking about an inspiring technology. And I think that in science fiction this is hugely powerful stuff. Like these are, you know -

Mary Anne Mohanraj: This is what I heard referred to, at least with the eco stuff, as solar punk, right. So instead of a grim version, here is the hopeful, inventive, ecological future.

Paolo Bacigalupi: Right. And so for me there was an opportunity to sort of pair a story about a kid who's tearing apart this ancient oil tanker and struggling to survive, but out on the water he could see these beautiful sailing ships. And the idea is that, "if I could get out there, if I could get on those ships, my life gets better." And so then you can kind of encapsulate a couple of different ideas, both the wreckage of the world, the unplanned and ill-thought out world, and also the opportunity of something better. And there's something there, like, for me was really powerful. And you know, but it's not necessarily like boom boom boom we need to build more sailing ships. Like isn't this a cool idea? Wouldn't these be neat? Like what if we did more with this?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Do you think that- I guess I'm wondering, do you see pitfalls for when people are trying- other pitfalls that we haven't discussed yet. Maybe when people are trying to write message fiction, ways that they go awry. For example, my own work has a lot to do with race and national politics. And I feel like there's a lot of singular solutions right. Here is the chosen one who is going to lead the people in a resistance battle. We're here in Dublin at World Con, so I've been looking at a lot of Irish post-colonial history and so the narratives often get framed as you know here is a set of heroes.

And I think genre is particularly susceptible to that, right, the chosen one narrative. And so one thing I prefer to see are a polyphony of approaches in a story where there's some people who are doing a worker collective, and there's some people who are trying to mobilize the economy in certain ways, and there is some people in active politics, and there's some people burning the system right. And seeing how all of that together interacts. I don't know if any of that sparks for you in terms of your approach or other people's approaches.

Paolo Bacigalupi:

So the things I think about when I'm like thinking about - you know I'm trying to illustrate a bunch of approaches or something. So something like *The Water Knife*, where I was writing about drought in the southwest and climate change, I wanted to sort of illustrate people who planned and people who hadn't planned. And so Phoenix is a devastated city where they hadn't done a lot of planning and they've really been impacted by long running droughts and stuff like that. And Las Vegas is a place that really looked around and said, "Oh bad stuff is coming. We need to start building these really highly efficient arcologies. We really need to be planning, we also need to be sort of weaponizing ourselves and going after other people's water and stuff." But they're really hard eyed about trying to, you know. And so you see the idea was that you're illustrating a couple of different perspectives on like how they engaged with the world. The way I think that relates is that you still can't say that like, have any of these people specifically espousing their values exactly. It's far more interesting to have them be fully realized. And this is the thing, you really want them to be interesting characters; people with their own hopes and dreams, their own motivations. I have people like Katherine Case, who's the head of the southern Nevada Water Authority, so she's the water, you know, sort of Czar. And she's a really hard-ass character. And she's also, you know, I hope, somebody who's presented as being like, this is the world I see, I am not here to be mean. I'm here to make sure that Las Vegas has water. And her portrayal and Angel's portrayal as her Water Knife, who goes out and actually blows up other people's water treatment plants. Like what motivates him to connect with this woman and to work for her, and to go out and do her dirty deeds, and stuff like that. And then to get to the other side of that, who are his victims and what are their perspectives, and stuff like that. The more you're presenting people as fully lived-in people who have a reason for being the way they are, for doing the things they

do. And then having them run into real conundrums with the things that they believe. It's not like, oh clearly my right path but they're challenged in some way and their right path might be the wrong path, and their immediate path might end up needing to veer. That's where the story gets you involved. That's where the reader can start living with the character instead of watching them as kind of like paper board cut-outs representing ideas. Yeah I'm not sure but it might've been you who actually made the comment about Jean Wolfe, did you?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, no, somebody else.

Paolo Bacigalupi: So I was talking to somebody about values stuff and if you want to make a values argument with your fiction. This was something Jean Wolfe had said. You better be able to walk pretty close to making the opposite argument as well in your fiction. So that you feel like you really argued all of the sides.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's something we try and teach an English lit class or composition class. You have to walk the students through the counter-argument thing. You don't want to just set up a straw man argument that's easy to knock down. You actually- the best essays which take on the real, serious, difficult challenges that are being posed by opposing sides, and then addresses them. Doesn't mock them, take them lightly, right? I think this is all super helpful. Before we wrap up I had sort of one tangential question which is for people who are interested specifically in ecological fiction, and science fiction and fantasy in particular. I had read- there's a set of essays that Amitav Ghosh presented in Germany that got collected in a book, and I'm blanking on the name of it, fairly recently, where he was sort of making the argument that its particularly difficult- he was sort of asking the question of why are there so few great ecological novels, right, climate change novel, etc. And he was sort of arguing that it was particularly difficult for people to take it seriously, because the scope was so vast. So when someone addressed it, and I think the sci-fi community got a little defensive about it when this came out because-

Paolo Bacigalupi: [in high pitched voice] "We write about climate change! Look at us! We did this!"

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah he actually specifically said not science fiction and people

were like, ohh. But I think what he meant was that the problem with doing it as science fiction, and I talked to him a little about this because I was also a little defensive. And he was like, the problem is when you're doing it as science fiction, a lot of people will still dismiss it as fiction. So if you look at something like Mad Max -

Paolo Bacigalupi:

Right, that's why I got published by Knopf. Because I wanted to be speaking to a mainstream audience. And I wanted to - this is more of a credibility issue with what the science fiction community is. It's one of the reasons why I targeted a mainstream publisher for my career. I was working towards this idea that I wanted to be sitting with a mainstream publisher as I write science fiction. That's not now quite as smeared with science fiction because Knopf is putting out instead and that legitimizes you and gives the opening for NPR to interview you about these topics or to discuss these-

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

This is a current serious issue that we should be looking at now and not a fantasy of the future right? So I thought that was interesting and then- sorry go ahead finish.

Paolo Bacigalupi:

Well then the other thing, these are big, wide, diffuse problems. And this is something I've come up against again and again and again where you're like trying to find some angle in. And in some cases it really is a genuine intellectual experiment to sort of narrow down how to talk about a complex environmental issue. So I came from short fiction. A lot of my early stuff was all short fiction and it was a really good laboratory for me to make different kinds of attacks on a story. If I want to write about endocrine disruptors, you know artificial chemicals that mimic hormones, just to define something there.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Yes love the definition [laughter].

Paolo Bacigalupi:

You know if I want to talk about that and I want to talk about something like estrogen mimics or something like that that are rife in our environment; how do you make this a story? And you know what's the three thousand word story of it and what's the ten thousand word story version of it. And it was really useful for me because you started thinking about how these characters have to represent something and then the story has to represent something and the world has to represent something and all those things tied together are gonna make the argument. And so, you know, for example I wrote a story called *Small Offerings* which is

all a doctor whose job is to abort first babies, because the babies act as these sort of suction cups for all of the toxins in women's systems, so you have the first baby and you abort it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh wow yeah.

Paolo Bacigalupi: And then you have your second one which is much more clean. And it's a very short story. It's about her doing this work and her also secretly getting access because she's Catholic getting access to another kind of chemical that also flushes these things out, but it's expensive. Because the market place makes it expensive. So it's about her values as a doctor helping these women to have clean babies, but it's an awful process, and then also her trying to dodge it at the same time. And so you have this world and the world itself is a very polluted world, everybody's wearing filter masks and stuff like that. And so you never have to say anything about, you know, this is good or bad. You just have to let her live with the conflicts of her life and her values in this space that she's been put. And then you sort of pause and look at it again, you know, it's like oh okay.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's super helpful. I'm gonna- I had one more question and then we're gonna wrap up. Which is just-

Paolo Bacigalupi: Of course I chose the most icky controversial feeling thing.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No I love it. I'm trying to remember there was a really excellent novel about abortion that worked very similarly, and I'm gonna- *The Cider House Rules*. It worked in exactly the same way. It gave you a doctor who really did not want to perform abortions, but because it was a choice between that and letting these women die at the time and it let you see his conflicted-

Paolo Bacigalupi: Welcome to a complex world, let's explore this, let's be with these characters as they feel complex things. That's worthwhile.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: We're gonna wrap up with, if I could just ask you for recommendations for other people who you think are doing interesting work specifically in the ecological, science fiction mode. I know Jeff Vandermeer takes a very different approach from you, but I think is really interested in many of the same issues and you see that in his work. If there's anybody else who you would-

Paolo Bacigalupi: You know Kim Stanley Robinson is somebody I tend to point to. Probably because I like him; he's such a nice person.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: [laughter] But he has been talking about this for a long time, right?

Paolo Bacigalupi: Yeah. I'm actually- this is embarrassing, this is one of the things where you reveal my complete ignorance, is that I'm not deeply read and so-

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's very tricky when you're enmeshed so deeply in trying to finish your own novels, trying to keep up with what everyone else is doing is not easy right.

Paolo Bacigalupi: Well frankly I don't tend to read the things- I like to read romances, comedies, things like that. So one of the things about writing, the kind of work that I do, it's not because I enjoy it. It's because I'm processing certain anxieties and trying to make sense of them. So I don't enjoy dystopias, I don't enjoy stories about ecological collapse, I don't enjoy stories about how profoundly, unnervingly mangled the environment is because I'm thinking about it all the time. It's not the kinds of stuff I seek out either. Occasionally I'll find non-fiction stuff for research. But I'm really- I actually shield myself pretty actively from some of that stuff.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And that makes a lot of sense. And there's only so much of the war in Sri Lanka that I can take at any given point as well.

Paolo Bacigalupi: I did want to say something else about the whole- the process of structuring your ideas, like trying to layer them in. So when I was writing *The Water Knife*, it's a climate change novel, it's a big screen thing, it's like so big. And so that was this process where I was like okay I'm gonna write about climate change, okay I'm gonna focus on drought, okay where am I gonna put this. I'm gonna put this in the American Southwest because it's a vulnerable area. Okay how am I gonna play with the ideas? I'm gonna have people who plan and people who don't. What kind of character am I gonna use? Well I'm gonna have one guy, I'm gonna have a water knife who goes around and blows everything up and takes water for Las Vegas. I'm gonna have a journalist so I can talk about sort of the intellectual layer of what's going on in this world. She can go and interview anybody, she can think about the larger intellectual meaning of what's kind of going on as well. She can be your sort of proxy, your narrator for describing some of

the world and the meaning of it. I wanted to have a climate refugee. I wanted to have something who's specifically been directly impacted. And so that's where Maria comes from. She's been taken out of Texas because it's already burned up and dried up. And then she's made it as far as Phoenix but she can't go any further because there are border controls everywhere. So you get to watch- this is a have-not, you get someone like Angel who's fighting for the haves. You start seeing with these perspectives- you start being able to live inside the direct human impacts of the world. But then you want to start building the world in a way so that it's illustrating again and again, we're talking about climate change, we're talking about drought. So you're looking for details that allow you to do it. And so when you're building the world, you're looking for how many times can you reinforce the idea of water scarcity. I'm going to invent something like clear sacs where people who are poor pee into these plastic bags and squeeze them to recycle their urine, and that's how they get fresh water. Whereas rich people are going to live in an arcology and it's all done very nicely. But even in that arcology they're going to be able to see on their faucets and taps, they're going to have a water meter that's telling them how much water is being used, what the cost is. So there's a price meter going. So the reader is also thinking about scarcity all the time. And then you want to have the environment itself saying something. So you wanna have dust storms and smoke from forest fires sweeping in and sort of affecting everything as the characters are going around doing their thriller plot, this is the world. And so if you do enough different pieces all together, it starts to build an almost, I guess, claustrophobic space where you cannot stop thinking about the implications of long term drought and climate change and it's all of these pieces all together. And then you're gonna have a plot about water rights. And so every single layer is functioning to say one little piece about this much bigger idea. And that's kind of the thing you're trying to do in terms of really drawing people in and then giving them a thriller plot. They think they're reading a thriller, but they cannot stop at any time thinking about climate change and what the implications are.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

I think that's a fabulous note to end on, so that was awesome. I now think we have a roadmap for how you might take that structure and how you might apply it to all different kinds of message fiction. So thank you, this is Paolo Bacigalupi, author of many books. Paolo where can people find your work?

Paolo Bacigalupi: Any independent book store.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And do you have a website, Paolo Bacigalupi...

Paolo Bacigalupi: Actually nobody can spell Bacigalupi and so I decided a long time ago that it would be a terrible idea to have paolobacigalupi.com. It would not work. So it's windupstories.com.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Windupstories.com, excellent. So this is Mary Anne Mohanraj with the Speculative Literature Foundation. Thank you.

Paolo Bacigalupi: Thank you.