

Kameron Hurley speaks with Gerry Canavan

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a new podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde. John Plotz is my co-host and partner in crime. If you are new to the show, here's the premise. Novel Dialogue invites a novelist and literary critic to talk about novels from every angle: how we read them, write them, publish them and remember them. We aim to bring you, our listeners, friendly and sophisticated dialogues that dissect the art of novel writing and consider the influence of characters, plots, and stories on how we think about our world. If you like what you hear, please subscribe to Novel Dialogue on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.

Today I have two sci-fi geeks in the virtual studio. We're all proud to be geeks here, right guys?

Gerry Canavan

Absolutely.

AV

Absolutely, excellent! Gerry Canavan is our critic. He is the author of *Octavia E. Butler*, a comprehensive study of the great writer's works. He is also the co-editor of the *Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction* and hosts his own terrific podcast called "Grad School Vonnegut."

Kameron Hurley is our intrepid novelist and has made a name for herself with dark and thrilling novels like the Worldbreaker Saga and most recently the Hugo nominated *The Light Brigade*. She is also the author of *The Geek Feminist Revolution*, which was my first encounter with Kameron's writings, and I was so impressed by its range. She calls out misogyny within the sci-fi book community, offers an unflinching defense of women and people of color within these fandoms, and is just brutally honest about what it takes to make it as a writer on the scene.

So I'm really excited for the conversation today and I pass the mic over to you, Gerry.

GC

Hi Kameron, thanks for doing this. I wanted to start by asking you a million questions about *The Light Brigade* which I really love. For people who haven't encountered it yet, obviously you should stop the podcast go read the entire book and then come back. But it's a kind of parody or satire of *Starship Troopers* that brings in a bunch of really interesting stuff about time travel and this time reading it, I even kind of got a little vibe of kind of like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* books and revolution in it, so I wanted to talk to you about everything regarding this book, but I wanted to start asking you a little bit about its composition, 'cause you've been pretty honest about where this book came from and how you put it together, and I have so many questions about your composition project and about utopian "hopepunk," which is the term you've kind of started to use to describe your work. So maybe could you tell us a little bit about where this book came from?

Kameron Hurley

So I actually wrote a short story called *The Light Brigade*, it was one of the first stories I did for backers for my Patreon, and what ended up happening was I love military science fiction. I adore it. It's, a lot of it is very fascist and sexist, and has many problems, but I think it's wonderful, I enjoy the things that are not those things. And what I realized is that you know, after I'd written that short story, I thought, you know, I really do have a military science fiction book in me. It's just a matter of, you know when am I going to write it and my agent actually read that story and said this voice is really great, I think this would be a really fun book to do as their second book 'cause I had done a two book deal for *The Stars are Legion* and an untitled second with my publisher and I said, yeah, that's a great idea. I would love to do something with that.

Now what happened was I started writing another book before this book and then the election happened in 2016 and I spent three months drinking and reading all of the Alphabet Series by Sue Grafton. The worst three months. And then once I had process, right? That's my process, read a bunch books and drink a lot. Then it was like you know what I want to write is a "fuck you" book. I want to write like the military science fiction book that I feel we need and deserve and all want in this moment. And yeah, I said, you know what? I'm just gonna go balls out, I'm going to have these long monologues because my background is also in the history of war and resistance, and propaganda, so that fascinated me, and I already had a ton of work to draw from having done a master's degree in that. And so yeah, a lot of it I wrote in again, I think it was 2017, I want to say it sometime in 2017. Writing that book and just being like, I'm just going to lay it all out and I'm not going to be afraid about "there's too much politics in my science fiction" 'cause if you think *Starship Troopers* isn't political, you're hilarious. So it really was, it was kind of my love letter for military science fiction and my raging against kind of the tropes and expectations we have with military science fiction so yeah.

GC

So it did start in some ways from that place of grief. You had tweeted just a couple days ago that, you know, we're recording this at the beginning of January in 2021—

KH

Everyone needs to know, yeah.

AV

Oh god help us all, god help us all

GC

--and it's been like two weeks, yeah, two weeks of absolute chaos. And so you had mentioned on Twitter that you were thinking of, you know, in two years from now, maybe a book will come out that processes my feelings from this, so it sounds like a lot of this was processing the Trump election, there's so much post-truth in the novel. Where did the kind of idea of kind of remixing *Starship Troopers* so closely, or at least in those early chapters kind of come in, like is it just that you like that book or love that book or love-hate that book?

KH

So this is *Starship Troopers* and also I think that *The Forever War*--

GC

Yeah, absolutely.

KH

-- 'cause which is an older book and people don't know as much about, which is a much more, I want to say, I don't want, it's not really leftist, but it was leftist for the time I guess. Much more of a critique of the military, then, I think *Starship Troopers* is. I love, now I read the book obviously, but I love the movie. I love the satire. I love him going again, that just "well, here's what I can do to help," you know, "do your part." I love the propaganda stuff. Obviously again academic interest in that and so yeah, so I think you know there's a couple of things.

Now the, by following that particular structure, especially in the beginning, it's a very familiar structure to readers. And I like to bring readers into my weirdness in a slow way, so that by the time all the time travel starts, right, 40,000 words in, they have something to cling to. Like again, even my dad read this book, which is amazing, but he reads war books and so he like "oh it's a war book" and so could understand it in that way, where some of these like bug magic and shape shifters, I don't understand, but this he could really sink his teeth into it because it follows the very familiar structure. So there was also that, of me saying I want to write a non-sexist, non-racist, non-homophobic military science fiction book, which is way harder than you would think. We have all these tropes, right? How the drill instructors speak and all of these things. And so interrogating my own expectations of how a military would or should or could be was also very interesting as far as an exercise. And that's what I like to do to myself too is say okay, now let's interrogate your own expectations and your own thoughts about what could be really different. So yeah.

AV

Were there any female writers or filmmakers that you look to for this? Or did you feel like you were really engaging with a male tradition and you were subverting that male tradition?

KH

I think a lot of it was definitely came from the old school stuff, which is primarily very, you know, male heavy. I did watch like a ton of like \$10 million sci-fi movie, B movies on Amazon at this point in my time as well, 'cause I was just, you know, reading it. But I think if you're looking at like feminist writers, who would influence that, probably Joanna Russ, honestly.

AV

I love Joanna Russ.

KH

Yeah, just because she has that very non apologetic badass sensibility when it comes to these things. And you know, a lot of people ask me about influences and she to me was a really big one 'cause she was the more radical than Ursula [LeGuin] and just was willing to burn it all down. For good reason! So yeah, so I think I mean if we're looking at, I do look to a lot of golden age stuff. So probably yeah Joanna Russ is probably one that's definitely in there for sure.

GC

I hadn't been thinking about *The Forever War*, but that book, I like that book, but it has said very strange, this homophobic section where the characters return to Earth after their kind of generational trip back from the stars and the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality has flipped, and most people are now homosexuals. Heterosexuality is kind of criminalized, or at least kind of strongly discouraged, and so they join up and go back to the war or whatever, right or fly off to the stars, I can't remember what part of the novel comes in. Was that part of the, I hadn't thought about that as

part of the architecture of *The Light Brigade*, right? But the book is has so much about queerness in it, and you know this is a spoiler alert for two pages from the end, but if you hadn't realized that the characters gender is never tagged until two pages from the end of the book, it's you know the book is not only very queer, but queer in the maybe the opposite way that some of the readers would have expected right in terms of what sorts of relations were happening. Was that in your mind as part of trying to like work through this space?

KH

It was certainly the homophobia in the military was a big one, but I think about. I have cousins and friends and things in the military who struggle with that, especially before don't ask, don't tell, which is a piece of shit. But again, ruined people's lives absolutely destroyed their lives. I had a cousin who wouldn't say anything about their partner 'cause you just couldn't until literally don't ask, don't tell they repealed it and it was like, Oh yeah, we've been going out! And we're like, yeah, we know. But no, it destroys people and it really sucks.

So again, it was important to me for, to have a non-homophobic, like I said, non-sexist, non-racist military just to see what it looks like. Not that it's realistic, just to see what it would look like. Hey, what would that look like? How would you insult people and it's all your child, your goal and ended up being, you know, very classist which has intersections with racism in this world too. But it was very much something on my mind, especially looking at the military, of the history of the military and the conversations going on today for sure.

GC

How did the gender decision come about? To obscure the character, main character's gender in the book in that way? Was that a conversation you had with your editor at some point? Did they like it or not like it?

KH

It was one of those things where I, because it's an "I", a first-person narrator, I didn't think about it much until maybe halfway through I realized, you know, I haven't really gendered this character, and I thought you know what, it doesn't matter. I don't care. And then my agent had said, you know, and then I thought, well, at the end I want to use a real name, 'cause you're kind of re-personing someone who's been depersonalised, right? I'm a soldier, I'm a grunt, I'm this and that and we use the first name and I did specifically choose a female first name because I did want to say definitively, I didn't want it to be, and that's the thing like John Scalzi wrote, what was that, *Locked In*, and it was, hey, Chris could be a man or woman, and there was never a tag and it could be anything. And I was like, no, I don't want that out. I want people to go, who thought it was a guy the whole way through, maybe. Most people think it's a woman, Cara Gee does the audio. People who have read me before are like it's probably one. But there happens, people who are legitimately surprised. So we're like I didn't even consider that. And that to me is an interesting reading experience to give to somebody, to say, why did I assume one way or another?

GC

It reminds me of something Octavia Butler did pretty commonly, which was not to give a racial tag, you know, until 40 or 50 pages in right? Again, many readers would presume because of her background, but it also reminded me of Delany's reading of *Starship Troopers*, where he talks about a scene in the book where Johnny Bravo takes off his mask and reveals himself to be Filipino, which is not actually a scene in the real novel. It's just something that Delany remembers, but he remembered it as being like really,

intensely personal to him. You know, I know Isiah Lavender has like searched to try to figure out what specifically Delaney was remembering, and there are little moments that could be like that, but it's the moment he remembers in the mirror doesn't actually appear in the novel, but it appears in Delaney's reading of the novel. And so it reminded me of that too, right? Like the discovery that one could find oneself in this novel, in an interesting place. I don't know.

AV

I just want to point out that this is a trend that's getting talked about so much in contemporary literary fiction, where literary is like the market category, not necessarily like an indicator of quality, and it was happening for such a long time in sci-fi, but I don't think it was talked about with the same discourse, because now, because of the Obama era there was a post-identity moment and now we're really coming back from that. I'm just thinking about, you know, Teju Cole's work in *Open City* or *Trust Exercise* just recently with Susan Choi and you know--

GC

Colson Whitehead does it in *Zone One*.

AV

And *Zone One* right, and so I'm wondering if this is something they're picking up from genre that never quite got credited, or if it's just, it's getting talked about because it's happening in a mainstream publishing kind of world.

GC

I was thinking about your, I think it won the Hugo, the "We Have Always Fought" essay?

KH

Yeah.

GC

Yeah, that talks about this kind of thing in a different way, right? That there's a kind of constant process of re-erasure of women's participation in the military and other industry as well. On the Vonnegut podcast we just did one where from a story from 1950, the main character is a male who's working alongside a woman. She's not a genius, she's not exceptional, she's just a mathematician who works with other mathematicians, and it's like that moment in '50, by '60 she would have had to have been an exceptional, unique, and probably frigid woman who, you know, really was just there because she was deficient in other ways, right? Like we constantly have to like remake a world that excludes women from these spaces they've always been in. So it works in that way too, right? Like it's not surprising, right, from another perspective. I don't know, I don't know if you remembered or were thinking about that essay, but it's a really good essay. People should seek it out. It's still out there.

KH

It's still out there. No, it is. My agent actually went said to me she's like, I have a feeling this is what you're always going to be known for. And I said if that's my legacy I'm cool with it. I'm cool with that being my legacy because it is a great, you know anytime this comes up I see it slapped down in comments all the time. People are like, "oh women never did-" and they're like bam!

So yeah, I mean I think about it a lot. I mean, that's like I said my academic background, that's what I've been very interested in, and I think it was that moment for me when I was going through historical

records for the African National Congress, the ANC in South Africa and I saw that uMkhonto we Sizwe really was like 25 to 30% women in their you know militant section of the ANC and I was like, why then in every resistance, and then I went to another resistance movements and sure enough you look at 20 to 30%. I was like well then why, if we're doing realism all the time, aren't we doing one in four, one in five of the resistance people in, say, *Rogue One* should be women, instead of a singular woman, historically, to be accurate. So like you, I do think about it a lot, and in fact you know writing *The Light Brigade* was interesting because I had just come off writing *The Stars are Legion* where everybody is a woman. So it actually felt there were a lot of dudes in it.

AV

I want to ask you because my own academic background is literatures from the British Empire, so I was really interested in that essay and the fact that you had gone to South Africa and done your research there and Robben Island pops up in *The Light Brigade*--

KH

Yeah it does, yeah.

AV

--and I was wondering if that was connected back to you know your time there and to the legacy of anti-colonial resistance, anti-apartheid resistance. Mandela, obviously you can't think about Robben Island without Mandela and so just the role that other parts of the world have played in what could also feel like a very American novel.

KH

Living in South Africa was really important and transformative for me, especially as someone from a small white rural town. I was of course raised in the white person way, which is "oh that was all in the past" and "people just need to work harder and we all love each other now." And there was something about going somewhere else and taking, this is what science fiction is for, and going somewhere else and taken it out of the context that you see and you've been immersed in every day and looking at it from a different perspective. And going oh shit. And I think that, you know, living there for a year and a half or so and researching that place and starting to compare that and the United States, really helped me understand the world a lot more, and so it does, it comes out. I did, I took a trip to Robben Island and it was very affecting to me.

GC

So let's talk about hopepunk. I know that's not your term, but it's one you kind of embraced a little bit and talked about in different ways. Could you talk a little bit about what "hopepunk" is and why you like it?

KH

Hopepunk kind of goes along with my idea of being grimly optimistic. And to me that understanding that the odds are against you, but there are still, there's still hope. And to me that kind of realism, that, "hey life is hard and you have to be persistent but there's real joy and good that can be done and people can change and there is a future ahead" is really important for me. It has really honestly, it has been—I'm trying to think when I finished *The Broken Heavens*, I think it's especially since the election, again since 2016 election, there was that I had to convince myself to keep going every day, because I've seen fascism. I've seen totalitarianism, I know how this, I knew where we were going! Building in the last few

weeks, it's like it was almost a relief 'cause the other shoe is dropping, right that I've been waiting for this whole time. So I knew it was coming, and saying we can get through this and find something on the other side of this and there's a future on the other side was super important to me personally. And I know from hearing from fans, very important for them as well. It's been a very dark time, I understand and again, understandably so, which is one thing that I really liked about having that background in history.

My grandmother grew up in World War II in Nazi occupied France. My grandfather was a GI, he drove trucks of the bodies out of the camps. He was cleaning up Europe you know, for like 7 or 10 years after they were married. It was a horrific time and it felt very close to me because they watched me, they looked after me my first, until I was 12, I think because my parents worked. And it was close to me in a way that it's not as close to a lot of you know, late Gen Xers, old Millennials. So yeah, it was a big deal to me to be like, Yeah, there's dark stuff and, there's dark stuff and a lot of people don't get through it, but a lot of people do. And that's important.

AV

Gerry, oh sorry, for the listeners. Could you just tell us more about hopepunk: who's term, who coined it?

KH

I actually don't know who coined it.

GC

So it was an essay that came out naming it, and then there was a kind of immediate sort of rejection of the term. It's kind of paralleling the idea of cyberpunk or steampunk, right? And there's something really nice about that idea of like hope's not a muscle or something, it's a technology.

KH

Hope is a verb, yeah?

GC

Yeah, it's Alexandra Rowland's term and she was the one who started it. And then there was a kind of, like I said, a kind of immediate backlash, and then a kind of immediate debate around whether or not hopepunk was something we would add to our canon of cyberpunks and steampunks and solar punks and all these other kinds of punk movements.

AV

Why so much backlash? What's wrong with hope?

KH

It's not gritty enough.

AV

It's not gritty enough, got it.

GC

Yeah, exactly. I mean it's out of--

KH

It's not serious enough.

GC

--it's out of step in some ways with that kind of dark gritty turn that's defined a lot of the genre. I mean, this is coming out of like a kind of *Game of Thrones* moment in the genre where everything has to be the worst version of itself and in some way. I don't know, like I said, it's an interesting way to kind of think about hope as something that you could operationalize, right and tap and turn into something that we could we could do together. I was kind of curious if you felt it constrains you to like, now you have to be hopepunk, like now you can't have a book that has a sad ending or a book where they all die or something like that. Does it constrain you, or is it just that it's just an ethos that you embody, and you would never write a book like that anyway?

KH

So somebody once asked me what is a Kameron Hurley book and I said, and that was something I had to start thinking about, is what am I interested in writing about? And I'm like, what people are going to get from Kameron Hurley book experience is there will be no sexual assault against women. There will be tons of very badass complex female characters, and there will be wild world building, like stuff you've never seen before. And those three things are very important to me. The rest of it, everybody can die at the end you know, whatever. I write a short story every month for Patreon, so there are some dark endings.

I've had a lot of people that have actually said that the *Nyx* book seemed very dark, my *God's War* series. I actually think the fact that anyone is alive at the end of any book is pretty nice. I'm very British in my sensibilities when it comes to that. Oh someone's alive, it's hopeful. But I think it really depends on the time. The ending of my *Worldbreaker Saga* was going to be very, very different before the election. Very, very dark and terrible and I actually, the more that the world changed around me, the more I was like I want to promote a different idea that there are more than two choices, that you don't actually have to make the worst possible choice of, there's only two choices, they're both bad, you have to make one bad choice. But if there's more than that, you know, we need to think beyond that. And the problem is we're stuck in this very partisan, right. There is this road, or this road and that's all that there is. There's this future or this future. And it was more important to me to interrogate that narrative.

GC

So how has Patreon changed the landscape then? For you and for the field.

KH

A lot of people don't understand with Patreon and with anything, some talk about this with OnlyFans as well. You are bringing your audience to a platform. That platform is not creating audience for you. And I think that is people look at that and they think of a chicken egg. Oh, if I just, it's like oh I'm going to put a story up on Amazon or book up on Amazon, then I'm gonna be a millionaire. Well, the chances that are very low. I do know someone who's done that, but the chances are very low.

And you know you have to find a way to cultivate that audience in other ways and I have cultivated an audience for a very long time. It's very conscious 'cause I do have a background in marketing and advertising. So I was very conscious that I need to build an email list. I need to reward fans, like I would

do giveaways and stuff all the time. I was already used to sending out packages things to oh, you did a pre-order and so you get all this, this, and this. So I've been doing that for a long time. So when I saw Patreon I said okay, let me soft launch this to my email list, I had an email list. And I said, you know, if we can get to at least \$500 a month for a story, that's worth it to me. That's about what I would get, you know, going to a decent publication for it, and it was short. And we got to \$250 like within a couple of days and I said, okay, well if the mail list can get me to \$250, opening up to Patreon and everybody I can get to \$500. And we just, you know, slowly built that over time. You know there was another big push, I think we got to \$2500 and then I lost my day job for a year. And everybody went digging around and said "Please, follow Kameron's page or she's gonna die," which was true, which was true. Health insurance is super expensive. It was a shitty time. And that really bumped it up, too. I think we're at almost \$4000 at this point.

And as far as is there pressure to write a story every month. No, if I don't want \$4000 I don't have to write a story every month, but I want \$4000 so I write a story every month. You know what I feel like, it's a really great comp, which is I feel like a pulp writer. Because pulp writers, you literally were like, oh shit I have to pay the rent. Send off the story and they send you a check that's the equivalent of the rent at the time, I think right.

AV

But you're also a classic writer, William Faulkner did the same thing.

KH

Great yes Hemingway! Oh my gosh right. So yeah, so this to me is it actually does provide, if you have an audience that you can bring with you, and it does provide you the ability to create and to make money creating which is wonderful.

GC

Alright, so we've talked about the highs and we've talked about the lows and there is a signature question that they ask in every episode of this podcast, which is what is the thing that gets you through the kind of low moments of writing. The treat, the reward, the thing that you turn to when it's not going well to re-energize you. Do you have something like that?

KH

I watch a lot of junk science fiction shows. What did we watch last night? Cyber something, I don't know. It was terrible. It was like they were clearly half filming a porno in another studio next door and then just doing this other sci fi thing on the side. I watch a lot of junk stuff. You know what actually I was rewatching *The Witcher* as well, *The Witcher* very much fills my pulp fantasy heart need, so I enjoy that as well. But yeah, sometimes it's just you know my, I came up in science fiction mainly from the shows and then started reading I think really more intensely when I 12 or 13 and because my dad just would rent like tons of B movies, like that was our time, our family time, Friday and Saturday nights. We would just watch these junk you know cyber this, cyber that, apocalypse cyber and and they just bring me joy.

GC

I think about that so much just because so much of what draws people into a relationship with either genre or just literature as a whole is that kind of pulpy stuff, garbagy stuff, the stuff you're supposed to disavow later right. Probably you read it as a teenager, right? Or watched as a teenager, right? And there's a weird sort of dance around, you know you can't teach that stuff in the classroom. You can't

write about it, right? Like there's no real way to kind of work through it. I'm starting a book series about that kind of material with my friend Ben Robertson because it's, you know it is the thing that brings so many people into a close relationship with art. But you know the prestige economy can't recognize it. So I like that that's a source of renewal for you. I think it's for a lot of us, we're all like still secretly, you know, watching those things and not talking about it as much as we should.

KH

Yeah I've read all the old Howard Conan novels. They're hugely racist, hugely sexist, but I love the idea, he's swiping through this army of rats and the piles of rats piling up around him. There's just, I don't know, there is, there's something I love about pulp so.

AV

Well guys, this was such a fun conversation. Thank you so much for being in dialogue with us and as we approach the end of another show, John and I would like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and acknowledge support from Brandeis University. The Mellon Connected PhD program and Duke University. Nai Kim is our production intern and designer and Claire Ogden is our sound engineer. Recent and upcoming dialogues include Ulka Anjaria in conversation with Madhuri Vijay, and Michael Johnston talking to George Sanders about his first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, but maybe not his last. So from all of us here at *Novel Dialogue*, thanks for listening and if you like what you heard please subscribe on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.