

“WONDER’S CHILD”: JACK WILLIAMSON (1983)

By John C. Tibbetts

Chicago, 30 October 1983

The publication in *Amazing Stories* in 1928 of Jack Williamson’s first short story, “The Metal Man,” launched a career unparalleled in the annals of science fiction and fantasy. From early classics like *The Legion of Space* series (and its offshoot, *The Cometeers*) in the 1930s to his last novel, *The Stonehenge Gate* in 2005 the versatile Williamson (1908-2006) excelled in space opera, dark fantasy, and philosophical allegory. He invested the genre of the shape-changing werewolf story with modernist elements of quantum physics and psychological subtlety in his classic *Darker than You Think* (1940; revised in 1948). In another classic, *The Humanoids* (1948; a novel-length sequel to his short story, “With Folded Hands”), a race of robots bring peace to the galaxy by rendering mankind powerless—in the most benevolent possible way. In the mid-1970s he was named a Grand Master of Science Fiction by the Science Fiction Writers of America (only the second person to receive this honor; the first was Robert A. Heinlein). In 1983 he published his autobiography, *Wonder’s Child*.

Our interview transpired in Chicago at the O’Hare Marriott on October 30, 1983. Jack Williamson was a Guest of Honor at the World Fantasy Convention.

THE INTERVIEW

JOHN C TIBBETTS: Jack, I described you as a science fiction writer, but just now you also added “fantasy” to your description.

JACK WILLIAMSON: I think the distinction exists in the mind of the reader and the writer, and not objectively. I’ve always felt that science fiction is based on the things that we feel could be true or come true, sometime, somehow and somewhere; and in fantasy we don’t care, we’re interested in the characters, the story, the drama, the color, and we don’t care if it is some sort of dreamland.

JCT: You’ve had a very long career. You have seen many fads and fancies come and go. You made your start around the time of the pulps, with *Amazing*?

JW: Yes, Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*, in 1928, which is getting to be a long, long time ago.

JCT: And then, relatively recently, you wrote a sequel to *The Legion of Space*.

JW: Yes. One that was called *The Queen of the Legion* was published this year.

JCT: So 1928 to 1983. That kind of staying power is unusual, isn’t it?

JW: Well, it’s nice to be still in the game.

JCT: As times have changed, as you have seen writers come and go and stories come and go--to what do you account your enduring popularity? Are you able to tell a whacking good story? Is the imaginative aspect of your work the strongest? What is the secret here?

JW: Well, I'm not sure I'm doing all that well, but I keep trying! I think, more than anything else that I take science fiction seriously. I believe in it as a way of thinking about science and progress and change and what the future will be. And people have asked sometimes why I didn't write something else, but I have a frame of mind, a frame of reference, that fits this sort of thing, and whatever I want to write seems to fall into it pretty naturally.

JCT: Let's go back to the time of the pulps, because that was at a time, certainly, when science fiction did not have a critical, or, let's say, a legitimate reputation, maybe, behind it. Although, curiously enough, many of the great writers of the nineteenth century in one way or another also dealt with what we would now call science fiction.

JW: In the nineteenth century, science fiction wasn't yet in the ghetto, and such people as H.G. Wells could publish science fiction stories that are still great that were part of the science fiction mainstream. Somehow early in this century in America, science fiction was mostly published in the pulp magazines, which were aimed at a not-very-literate, not very well-heeled, almost adolescent male audience. And that shaped it, pretty much. This was not true so much in Europe, and I believe that overseas science fiction has always been more respectable than it has been here. I was in Yugoslavia a couple of years ago, and I was impressed that the fans I met were mostly serious professional people, and they regarded science fiction as a legitimate area for the discussion of serious social issues.

JCT: Many writers who have survived that age of the late 20s into the 30s talked more about survival, I suppose, than social issues. It was a hard way to make a buck at that time, wasn't it?

JW: It was. You were doing pretty well to get a penny a word for what you wrote. Of course a penny a word was probably equal to a dime a word now, which--it was worth waiting for but it was also hard work.

JCT: And at that time, what were the ideal publications that you had to crack to know you had made it as a writer?

JW: Well, through most of these years, *Astounding Stories* which finally became *Analog*, was the top magazine. And if you were writing fantasy, why, *Weird Tales* was the leader for many years. *Unknown* for a few years flourished and died, with a different sort of science fiction, and *Argosy*, through at least the earlier years, was publishing the most popular writers and paying them somewhat better, people like A. Merritt and Edgar Rice Burroughs were getting a nickel a word or more.

JCT: You mention those two writers. I wanted to ask you if they were two of the folks who maybe influenced you the most at this time.

JW: I think certainly they were. I read some of Burroughs, and I still admire him as an excellent story craftsman and stylist, and Merritt was writing a sort of colorful half-poetic fantasy that infatuated me completely. My first published works were pretty Merritt-esque.

JCT: For example. . . .?

JW: Well, *The Moon Pool* was Merritt's story that influenced me most. My first story called "The Metal Man", was in many ways sort of parallel to a story of Merritt's called *The People of the Pit*, an adventure in a volcanic crater with strange creatures and lots of captures and escapes. The basic situation is the same, though we had different locale, different creatures, and so forth.

JCT: Now these are wonderful models and yet at some time I suppose you realized that you cannot continue to be imitative of them. You cannot let that become a sort of a chain around you, either.

JW: No. Well, at the same time or about the time I started writing, I discovered H.G. Wells' short stories and they, I felt, were, well, more sophisticated, probably more intelligent, more realistic. They depended more on ideas and less on a sort of poetic style and fantastic imagination. And I gradually got farther and farther away from Merritt. I worked on several stories and collaborations with a doctor named Miles J. Breuer, who was doing good work at the time, in the late 1920s, and he emphasized the values of character and believability and put less emphasis on wild imagination. He steered me toward better plotting and stronger narratives. We worked together on a couple of novels at that time, *The Girl from Mars* and *The Birth of a New Republic*. The last one was about a revolution on colonies on the moon.

JCT: Origins have been so important to many of the famous fantasy and science fiction writers of our century. And I'm thinking about the New England group, the Minneapolis group, and the Chicago group and one in San Francisco. Where was your center of activity as a youth at this point?

JW: I grew up on a farm in eastern New Mexico, and most of the material I came up with may have been printed in New York or Chicago, but it arrived by US Mail.

JCT: Were you always able to write then using the southwest as your center of activity?

JW: Well, I nearly always lived there, and I don't feel it's any great handicap. I spent a little time in various other places with great rewards, but I always felt that New Mexico was my home. Still is.

JCT: We have to of course touch on some of your works that justly now are considered classics. *The Humanoids* is something that you will often hear devoted readers refer to as one of the Greats, and certainly it's a book that made a great impression on me. Is this one

of the books that most of your fans and readers want to talk to you about?

JW: I suppose so. It's certainly been the most often translated and reprinted work of mine. *The Humanoids* itself is a sequel to a novelette called *With Folded Hands* which appeared in *Astounding*, that I feel said the same thing more effectively. John Campbell, editor of the magazine, wanted a sequel, and I wrote a sequel, which for various reasons has a sort of ambiguous ending, but ambiguity is not really *bad*, I think.

JCT: That ending really knocked me out!

JW: Thank you. You know, they are units of a cybernetic brain that are utterly subservient to mankind—so much so that they remove the threat of interplanetary war; but in the process, they threaten mankind with complete mental and physical stagnation. If you resisted them, they used a drug that reduced you to a kind of childlike robot.

JCT: They “healed” our sicknesses—

JW. Yes. And in doing so intended to extend their Prime Directive to other galaxies. “To serve and obey.”

JCT: And it *ends* like that! The book preceded a whole decade of science fiction films, like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in which we saw creatures of space, usually metallic beings, devoid of feelings, devoid of emotions and human concerns. It's almost as if maybe you had been an influence upon the filmmakers to come.

JW: I don't know. I would like to have had the story made into a film, and it was optioned—it's been optioned a couple of times—but it's never gotten to the silver screen.

JCT: That concern with an oncoming mechanization of man, is that something that you have lived long enough to see come to fruition? How do you feel about the state of things now, in hindsight?

JW: It seems to me also that the humanoids are a sort of metaphor for society, and as our society becomes mechanized and driven by technology, society then comes to limit the freedom of the individual more and more. Yes, the story's about what I think is happening.

JCT: Well, I don't mean to sound pretentious, but I'm wondering if it's fair to say that the science fiction writer sometimes can be a kind of a watchdog for oncoming technologies and how they might or might not affect us.

JW: It's seems to me that I've said or thought the same sort of thing, that at least science fiction is a way in which we can discuss and feel the impact of technological change, technological evolution.

JCT: At the same time, your ability to tell a rattling good yarn—we cannot dismiss that.

Because to tell a good story has to be one of the most difficult things in the world.

JW: I like a good story, and I've always felt that no matter what you say in a book or a story, why, it's wasted unless people read it. So I have worked hard to make my material readable, to capture the reader and hold the reader.

JCT: I'm thinking of things now like the *Legion of Space* and *Legion of Time* stories, with their unabashed Space Opera with strong stories and colorful characters. And I mean that as a compliment.

JW: Thanks. In my early days I wore the mantle of Space Opera proudly. *The Legion of Space* series has been very popular. I happened by accident to have a good central character for that, Giles Habibula, a drunken bum that is more or less drawn after Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff.

JCT: I was going to ask you about Giles Habibula. What is it about this character that has so engaged so many readers over the generations? He wasn't even a major heroic character, but he always stole the show!

JW: Well, in the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence, there was a stock character of a drunken soldier, and Shakespeare borrowed this stereotype and gave him a wonderful new life as Sir John Falstaff. And I tried to borrow from Shakespeare, and he represents, well, human instincts and weaknesses in a pretty vivid and good way. It was great fun to place him in the middle of the 30th Century, where he and the Legion battled ferocious aliens. I kept bringing him back, in the *Cometeers* stories. Just this year [1983], he shows up in *The Queen of the Legion*. I don't know how to describe it, but there's something that's still wonderful to me about it. I don't claim any credit for his creation, though.

JCT: Well, when you can place characters like that in such bizarre and complex surroundings, they remind us that the human element is the most important after all, I suppose.

JCT: When you're working on books like these do you often tell your stories to people; do you follow the function of a traditional storyteller; or is it only coming out of your fingers onto paper?

JW: I think it comes out of the fingers on paper. There's a hazard in telling the story, because if you tell it it's expressed and you don't have to write it. So I can think most writers are pretty cautious about presenting their material orally. When we were writing for the pulps, it has always seemed to me that that was ephemeral, the pulp paper was not long-lasting, and in those days material was not reprinted, so it has struck me that writing for the pulps was very much like the Homeric bards chanting their narratives. It was a matter of the moment.

JCT: All writers have had favorite children that maybe went wrong—a book or an idea

that just never quite came to fruition, or at least in the way you would have wished. Anything that you'd like to share with us in that regard?

JW: Well, only that this is a painful and disastrous thing, and a good many of my projects over the years have gone off the track, and often for reasons that I wasn't able to diagnose. I've done a good bit of collaboration, most of it with Fred Pohl on our "Undersea" series [1954-1958] and "Starchild" series [1964-1969], and one novel with Jim Gunn, *Star Bridge* [1955]; and many of these things started from projects that I'd undertaken and was unable to finish on my own.

JCT: The very fact that they might develop in unexpected ways, sometimes disastrous ways though, is part of the challenge, the continuing challenge, of any writer. Life must be tough sometimes when you have to face that day to day.

JW: Yes. Especially when you're trying to make a living on a penny a word or less. I always found that what I actually published was written in probably less than half of my working days, and I wasted a lot of time on material that didn't work out well, that either I couldn't finish

JCT: How about something that you had published in one of the pulps, at least in magazine form, but never got out into hard covers? Anything you would like to have seen come out like that?

JW: Well, I have one paperback novel, *Bright New Universe* [1967], that was just in a nice paperback, and I'd sort of like to see that in hard covers, though it's not a perfect work.

JCT: But why do you think it should be reprinted?

JW: I put a kinda different take on the whole idea of contact with aliens. In the story there's a white-supremacist group that tries to block our efforts to make contact, because it would encourage minority groups to revolt. There's also the fear that contact with advanced aliens might destroy Earth's ancient cultures.

JCT: I see what you mean. Those are the kinds of "heavy" themes that some don't expect from science fiction. A lot of times you'll hear science fiction writers apologizing, as if they're not doing a legitimate endeavor. Is that a part of it? What is the toughest part?

JW: I'm not sure what the toughest part is. I have always enjoyed writing, and I'm happy to have kept in it, and sometimes it's been tough to make a living at it. There was a period in the--oh, beginning about 1950, when I had a feeling that a lot of new writers were coming in who were smarter and better educated and so forth than I was, and I felt a little bit out of the game, sometimes more than a little bit. I did a comic strip for the *New York Sunday News*, which sort of distracted me from other writing; and when that was done I

got some college degrees and became an English professor for about twenty years.

JCT: It's interesting you bring that up, because I did want to inquire if your own teaching has also kept sharp your writing skills as well.

JW: Well, I believe that the opportunity to read and talk about a lot of the world's best literature can't have hurt my writing skill. Since I retired from Eastern New Mexico University, I've continued part-time to teach Creative Writing and Fantasy and Science Fiction. I've enjoyed studying literature, I enjoyed teaching it, I managed to keep writing when I could during the vacations and holidays, and I was delighted after I retired that I can still write and people will still publish my stories.

JCT: And of course your own works are now the subject of many a classroom curriculum around the country and high schools and universities and I'm curious what you would be hoping, at least, that the instructor would be saying about your work.

JW: Well, I don't know, I wouldn't want to dictate to him.

JCT: Well, this is your chance to go ahead and just do a little wish fulfillment or speculation here. How would you hope that you would be judged eventually? We could put it that way.

JW: [pauses before answering] I'm not really prepared to say that. I'm delighted to be remembered. I have taken my writing seriously, and more and more seriously, I suppose, at least my purposes in writing have probably become more serious and a little more complex. But I've generally written things I've believed in, things that were interesting to me, and I've felt that there is something about science fiction that makes it special—enables us, or gives us a way of talking about technology and what it's going to do to us. Science, I've always said, gives us the hard facts, but fiction gives us a way of feeling about them that the scientific approach doesn't, so it's a way of human feeling about change and progress and technological revolution.

JCT: Jack Williamson, in conclusion, is it possible to also think for a moment and maybe share with us, what's the best science fiction idea, story or book you ever saw?

JW: It's hard to say. I'm still very fond of H.G. Wells, who I feel is a principle creator of science fiction as we know it, and has done many stories that I still admire tremendously, but if I had to pick *The Time Machine* over *The Island of Dr. Moreau*—

JCT: Yeah.

JW: —would be pretty difficult.

JCT: And how about projects for the future, anything special on the drawing board?

JW: Well, I've finished an autobiography called *Wonder's Child* that should be published next May by Bluejay Books [1984], and I'm working on a novel called *Life Burst* for Del Rey that will hopefully come out a year from now [1984; revised 2005].

JCT: Would you call yourself a mainstream writer at this point?

JW: Well, I've always been happy to be a science fiction writer. I think that the division between mainstream and science fiction is sort of tending to melt away.

JCT: And of course the paperback revolution has aided in that, I believe, too.

JW: I think so.

JCT: Do you think the paperbacks could be compared to the pulps of yesterday?

JW: They've certainly replaced the pulps. That is, the paperbacks, the comic books, and TV between them have done what the pulps used to be.

JCT: And yet if *Amazing* or *Weird Tales* could come back, would you hurrah! the day?

JW: I suppose so, though they can't come back as they were. I think that you can't set the clock back.