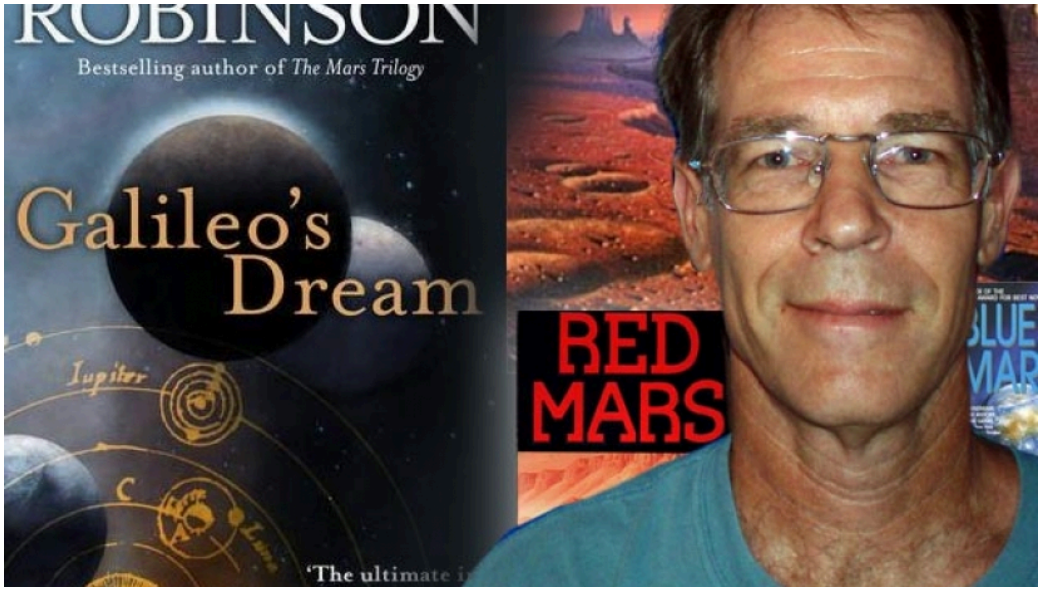
Interview: Kim Stanley Robinson

Originally published at http://www.denofgeek.com/books-comics/11394/interview-kim-stanley-robinson



Kim Stanley Robinson is the author of the hugely successful *Mars* trilogy, which in the 1990s (with *Red Mars*, *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars*), lent painstaking scientific research and spiritual depth to the favourite SF theme of terraforming the red planet. The first book of the trilogy is currently being adapted for television by AMC.

In his new work *Galileo's Dream*, the award-winning American writer travels back to late Renaissance Italy to fill in some very unexpected background detail on the life of Galileo - who, as it transpires, was occasionally called over to the moons of Jupiter to lend advice to a future culture...

Did *Galileo's Dream* start out as science-fiction in the early stages, or were you considering a more abstract historical novel at any point?

The novel came to me as a science fiction idea; what if Galileo looked at the moons of Jupiter through a telescope that took him right to people there in the future? Thinking I guess of David Lindsay's great beginning to *A Voyage To Arcturus*, which I have always admired. So, this was a pretty crazy idea, but my agent and editors liked it, and I did too, so it led eventually to the novel as written.

Very soon I came to the realization that I didn't want to change a single thing about Galileo's real story, which is so compelling as it stands, but only give it a kind of secret back story, or what have you. Something like his dream of the future, in fact, a kind of Renaissance fantasia.

Does *Galileo's Dream* continue the themes of ecological and social reform which thread so much of your work?

No. The connection with my earlier work has more to do with science and its relations with society, philosophy, religion, and history. The Galileo novel also involves a struggle to "make history better" which I suppose is a connection to social reform and my utopian thread more generally.

What was your approach to bringing Galileo to life, in terms of research and imagination?

I read everything about him in English. It's a big literature but not impossibly so, and it's extremely interesting, or so I found it. Then in terms of bringing him to life, so to speak, I focused on what in the historical record seemed most personal and interesting on that level; the complicated politics of his situation and life.

Then in purely technical terms, books that are essentially "daily life in X" type things are very useful for novelists. I had done similar research for *The Years Of Rice And Salt*, and indeed researched the real scientific revolution for the Samarkand chapter of that book, which is what drew me to Galileo in the first place. It's a pleasant part of the process.

Lastly, I had to imagine what Galileo might do and say if confronted with people from the year 3020 on the moons of Jupiter, and this was fun, the science fiction part of the game. A kind of channeling; "what would Galileo say?" As I think the book shows, I ended up with a deep admiration, really a kind of love, for Galileo, despite or because of his many flaws and problems.

Do you find the rigours of writing 'period' an obstacle compared to worlds that you can prognosticate or invent?

No, in many ways it's easier. No one can invent all the details that reality, or even history books, can provide you with. I noticed that most sharply after spending many years trying to imagine the Mars inhabitation, then going to Antarctica and writing about what I saw there. What a relief to have the support of the real, the kind of group invention that a culture does, that an individual can't.

Is your work an expression of your credo or a place where you try to define your beliefs? In the *Mars* Trilogy, I sensed (in the characters of Ann and Michel particularly) that some of the characters were trying to resolve questions that remain issues for you personally.

I think this is true for me, and I would hope it is true for all novelists. In the *Mars* trilogy I felt the appeal of both the Green and Red positions, and this was a big help in the writing of the novel, as I see-sawed back and forth from one position to the other, following the characters' beliefs; I could believe them all while I wrote them, which gave them a certain conviction.

Then the eventual *Blue Mars* synthesis was a kind of reconciliation in my own feelings as well as the projected situation.

Glad you also mentioned Michel, whose homesickness and nostalgia is I think a pretty common condition, especially among those of us who for various reasons cannot ever get back home. In my case, Orange County California has been destroyed by an overlay of car-centered development that means the place I knew is no longer there. This is not an uncommon experience, especially since as years pass you can't get back no matter what has happened to the home place itself.

Your doctoral thesis was on the novels of Philip K. Dick, and yet you don't seem to number among his many imitators as a science-fiction writer. What is it about Dick's work that drew you to it?

My thesis advisor, Fredric Jameson, said to me, "write about Philip K. Dick, he's the greatest living American writer." I had only read *Galactic Pot-Healer* at that point, and was pretty surprised to hear this judgment! But as I read on, I saw what Jameson meant. I like most of all in PKD's work the emphasis on the ordinary person as hero, and the sharp critique of capitalism, the emphasis on its destructive effect on human relations.

Also, he was technically very good, especially at structuring novels, despite the tremendous haste with which he worked. A lot can be learned by studying the structures of his plots, and I did that with pleasure.

Can you tell us how involved you are with the AMC *Red Mars* project? Is a three-season series envisaged encompassing the *Mars* trilogy? Are you concerned at whether TV can bring to life such cinematic visions as the space-elevator wrapping itself twice round Mars...?

I am merely a consultant to the AMC *Red Mars* effort, and my agents are co-producers. I don't know what the plans are long-term. Right now they are at the script-writing phase, and nothing has been green-lighted, so we'll see what happens.

As for how it might look, I think the space elevator falling is the kind of thing TV could be particularly good at, actually. It's the problem of traversing 70 years that is the real problem for them. Glad it's not my problem!

What events of the last few years have alarmed you in regards to where mankind is heading - and which others give you hope?

Well, the ongoing carbon burn and the extinctions are the most alarming. The glaciers melting make a very clear sign, a physical proof, of climate change, and that is useful, but the loss of the glaciers is sad for mountain lovers, and in Asia it's worse than that, as it is catastrophic for water supplies. Ocean acidification is another physical confirmation that the problem is real and severe. Deforestation, and so forth.

On the hopeful side, all this is being reported and discussed, and the scientific community has really come on strong, out of their labs and out of the field, to insist that the problem is real and demands action right now. They've been ahead of the public and the political leadership on this, and this is a new thing in history, as before this scientists preferred to do their science and leave cultural choices to the culture at large.

That they have come out so strong this time is one sign of how bad the danger is. But this is a scientific culture through and through, we live by it, literally, and so if it comes to a showdown between science and capitalism, as I believe we are seeing now, then - gasp - science is going to win.

Hard to believe, scary to say, but it's science that makes the food, the medicine, the toys, all of it: and capitalism is simply the protection racket skimming off the profits. It makes nothing. So when push comes to shove, science is going to win - if we support it right. This is a nice thought for democracy and the future of our children.