



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## World-building, Dangerous Magic and Jane Austen: A Conversation with Sean Williams

Gillian Dooley

[Sean Williams](#) is a South Australian author who has published more than 50 books and well over 100 short stories for adults, young adults and children. Most of his work is science fiction or fantasy, and he has created several series, including *Twinmaker* (3 volumes) and *The Books of the Change* (10 volumes). He often co-authors with writers such as Garth Nix and Shane Dix. Sean is a multiple recipient of both the [Ditmar](#) and [Aurealis Awards](#) for science fiction and has appeared on the New York Times Bestseller list.

*I got to know Sean when he joined the staff of the English and Creative Writing department at Flinders University in 2019. I was intrigued to hear about *Impossible Music* (2019), a novel about a young musician who suddenly loses his hearing, and I read it with great enjoyment as soon as I could get my hands on it. When I heard him say in a public conversation that he read Jane Austen for inspiration when writing a realist novel (a new genre for him) I approached him and suggested we talk. I hurriedly read a very small fraction of his other output – the first novels in the *Twinmaker* and *Change* series, and *Magic Dirt*, a book of short stories – in preparation, and we met in his office in December 2019.*

GD: The first thing that I wanted to ask is how hard is it to create a new world? Is it easier to use the same world over and over again, or harder, because you have to deepen it and make it more and more detailed? Or is it harder to use the 'real' world?

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**SW:** I think it's equally hard across all the different possibilities and permutations, since they each require different skills and approaches. My fantasy world of *The Change* is 10 books, a million words or so, and I approached writing the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> books by finding new ways for me to be interested in this world. New conflicts, new environments in which the conflicts could take place, new characters or new ways for existing characters to engage with the world around them. Thankfully, the word 'Change' is right there in the title, so I find that a very easy world to write into, even though the world is broadly based on Australian landscapes I experienced in my childhood, and is something I want to capture exactly right. Writing from real life can take a lot more research (you've got to get *everything* right) but on the other hand you can short-hand some details: for instance, you can just say he got into his Holden HJ and people who need to know will know what kind of car that is.

GD: Or you can just say his car. Everyone knows what a car is, and they'll supply 'car'.

**SW:** That's right. Like a landspeeder in *Star Wars*, too. Many people know what that is, but if you're inventing a new science fiction series and you've created some kind of vehicle, you've got to describe what it is, how it works, how many people it carries... You can become lost in those kinds of details.

GD: Exactly. But I kept thinking, this is so clever because this is such an alien world: you're providing just enough to keep me reading and wondering what that word means. You don't immediately define it, but as we go along I have come to trust that you will get around to making it clear not in a didactic way but in a natural sort of way. That's a real skill.

**SW:** It's taken a lot of practice. Sometimes you can stop and say, 'This thing is this way,' because it's interesting enough, and readers of genre novels can tolerate info-dumps of that kind, just like they might in a literary novel or a mainstream novel. Sometimes you really need that depth of description. Other times, you might want to create a word or use an existing word that will convey the meaning and as you say, the reader, as long as they've got the general idea of what's going on, they'll trust you to explain anything else you need later on. Fingers crossed!

GD: It's building that trust and getting people engaged early on while they're still feeling their way around in this world.

**SW:** Someone very wise, it might have been my old friend Jeff Harris, said to me once that when you're depicting a world you don't want to describe everything in it because then it's not a novel; it's an encyclopedia. What you want to do instead is convey how it's *different* from our world, so the reader can assume everything else is the same.

GD: Sometimes in *Twinmaker*, you did that by having some people living in that other world, I mean that was part of the plot as well, but you could see these things that were no longer of any use, like cars ...

**SW: ... and ovens, and gardens for growing vegetables.**

GD: I really liked that – I start looking for these tricks.

**SW: Thanks. I made it hard for myself in that book, though. I should have made Jesse – the Outsider – the main character so everything could be explained to him. Instead, the main character is already embedded in the dominant society. But it did give me the chance to knock her out of her world and into ours, so we can see it through her eyes.**

GD: Yes I see what you mean. You can do it either way. You can have a stranger coming in and having to find out, or you can have someone who's in the world. But then again, you had her responding to all these other things, and thinking 'what's that funny old thing?'

**SW: It gave me the opportunity to do something that I'd always wanted to try. Joss Whedon (I think) once said that there are two kinds of fantasy stories. One is where somebody is taken out of our world and plunged into an alien world. The other model, the Buffy model, is when somebody lives in our world and things burst in from the outside. The *Twinmaker* books gave me a chance to have somebody living happily in their alien world, and the person that busts into her world is from our world.**

GD: What's left of our world.

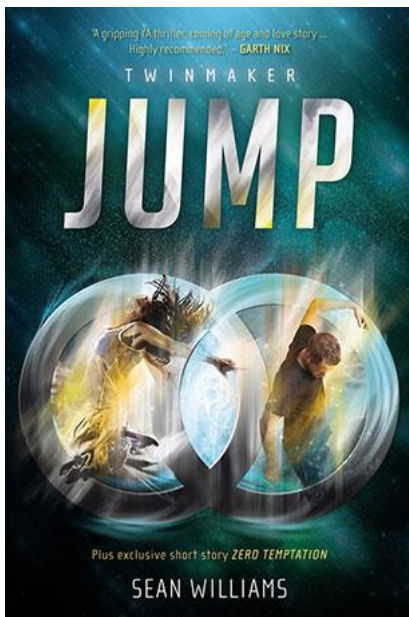
**SW: That's right.**

GD: With these worlds, it seems that you're creating these crazy – or possible – futures – although some of them are sort of parallel universes. Do you share ideas, or is there competition among your peers? Do you say, I like that idea, I'll build on that? I know you co-author.

**SW: Yes, I enjoy co-authoring. It's a great way to share ideas, skillsets, philosophies ... everything. I used to be so worried about trying to come up with ideas that hadn't been explored before, until I accepted that there really *are* no new ideas. Everything has been explored before, but there are combinations of ideas that haven't, or treatments of ideas that no one's tried yet. The matter-transmitter that lies at the core of *Twinmaker* is the subject of my PhD, and it is a very, very old idea. It goes back to 1877, in fact. I had to try very hard to find new uses for this old idea, twists that hadn't appeared in *Star Trek*, say. Even so, I do occasionally uncover in my research that what I had thought was a new twist was dreamed up by somebody else years ago. That's fine, though, I remind myself, because nobody's used them the same way that I did.**

GD: So who were the pioneers? H.G. Wells ...

**SW: Wells didn't ever use the matter-transmitter but he did read Edward Page Mitchell, who was an amazing editorial and short story writer in America at the time. He wrote the first**



mechanical time travel story 10 years before Wells, the first matter-transmitter story, a story about electric trains, a story about a thinking machine small enough to be fitted into a man's skull in order to create a cyborg hybrid, and many other groundbreaking ideas. He published these stories pseudonymously in New York's *The Sun* and it was only in the 1960s that Sam Moskowitz tracked down the single author behind them all. We know that Wells had *The Sun* in his library so it's quite likely that Wells was influenced by him, to a certain extent, to write *The Time Machine*. Mitchell was an amazing writer, but there were other early pioneers of this particular trope too, some really big writers, like Arthur C. Clarke Arthur Conan Doyle. Hugo Gernsback, a pioneering editor of science fiction, was very keen on the idea and actively encouraged stories about it from his stable of writers. There was some mad stuff in the 1930s as a result. Fascinating times.

GD: And how scientifically plausible do you need to be?

**SW:** To create a science fictional world? That is a really good question. Your readers will always be willing to suspend their disbelief to a certain extent or they wouldn't be reading SF at all, but there is a line for every reader beyond which they might not go. Some readers, for instance, won't read anything remotely like *Star Wars* because there's no science in *Star Wars*; it's science fantasy, with the emphasis on the *fantasy*. It can be a bit of a bait and switch, then. In the *Twinmaker* series, the matter-transmitter idea feels plausible because it's a combination of 3D printing, scanning technologies and information transmission, three things we already have in the real world, so in theory building a working teleporter should just be a matter of engineering to scale it all up. The scaling up, however, is so enormous that it's going to be, when we finally make it, the most incredible engineering advance in human history. So in order to make the trope and its ramifications as plausible as I wanted them to be I had to kind of wrap it all up in things that are much more likely, like solar power generation beaming down the necessary energy via maser, or little contact lenses that you can use for augmented reality. Things like these are probably 10 years away, today, and help make the more fabulous elements of this fictional world feel a lot more real. That's the bait and switch. While your readers are accepting this, you're getting away with that. Plausibility doesn't mean accuracy, but they're related concepts. You really don't want to throw in anything that's outright wrong. That makes me, personally, really annoyed, when something is unnecessarily wrong in a book I'm reading. It makes me very cranky. I'm more likely to go, well, there's no reason for that. I'm just not liking this any more, and I'll put it aside.

GD: It's a little bit like historical fiction. There is a leeway you'll give and then there's a point ...

**SW:** 'They wouldn't have used that word!'

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GD: Exactly! That is that thing that catches me up more than anything. They would not have used 'appropriate' in that sense in 1870.

**SW: SF cinema constantly offends my sensibilities. I mean, look at *Prometheus*. It's full of scientists who are behaving like amateur idiots, so unprofessional. We are supposed to believe that these are scientist being sent out to another planet to investigate alien life? Not a chance.**

GD: But you need drama – people have to be stupid to make drama!

**SW: But who cares about stupid people causing drama?**

GD: Exactly!

**SW: I want smart people who despite their best efforts are still caught up in drama. And then they have to think even harder to get out of it. That's what we want! You can still have explosions.**

GD: So the difference between *Twinmaker* and *The Change* is between science fiction and fantasy? Or is it not that clear-cut?

**SW: Well, when *The Stone Mage and the Sea* came out, there was a question as to whether it was fantasy. I mean, yes, it is, it's undeniably fantasy, it's got magic in it, but it also has the main characters driving around in a Mad Max-style buggy that's powered by alcohol, so there's an element of scientific realism in there as well.**

GD: Well you can't get away from a little bit of reality.

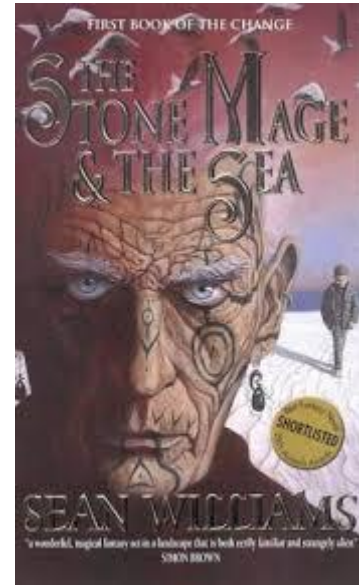
**SW: And why would you want to?**

GD: We have got have something to connect us with what we know as human beings. We can't even imagine things that ... we can't imagine.

**SW: That's right. I wanted this world to be a post-apocalyptic world, and I wanted it to be a very South Australian world, and as soon as you make it a fantasy set in South Australia you run up against all sorts of things that just wouldn't work in Tolkien any more. The Shire is a series of small villages that you can walk to and from on foot in less than a day, whereas in this place it might take weeks to get to the nearest village, even with camels. So I thought I'm going to need something Mad-Maxy, and that makes it more interesting to me too. There's still magic in their lives, but why wouldn't they use real stuff too? They still have remnants of our knowledge.**

GD: And not everyone's plugged into the magic, are they? And there's a certain danger there, obviously.

**SW:** Always danger when magic's involved. Comparing *Twinmaker* and *The Change* is interesting because they're both YA (young adult) novels in a way and they tell not dissimilar stories in that the main character is discovering lots of things about their world that they didn't know and their place in it. And they're both making terrible mistakes as they're going along, and trying to be good people, and not wanting to upend the world order. They're both stories that I love to tell. But the world-building was very different. For *Twinmaker* I spent a lot of time trying to come up with the names for things like 'The Air' that would imply the technology without me having to explain it, as we talked about earlier. In this case, I didn't want to use 'The Cloud' because it will date, but I wanted a term that would be just as marketable. My wife came up with that name, by the way, and I think it works. I also devised laws and stuff surrounding the whole matter transmitter experience – I wanted it to be a functioning society on every level. So I spent a lot of time thinking about how schools would work, how clothes and fashion would work, all these things; I spent a *lot* of time thinking about that world. Whereas in the books of *The Change* I kind of started with a feeling and a landscape and characters and went exploring. Later, I had to go back and make a bunch of changes, of course, to make it consistent. And I borrowed from a lot of people for *The Change* as well. (Ursula Le Guin is one.) What I didn't invent I borrowed, like everyone does, in order to create a plausible magical world in which a whole society exists.



**GD:** That's the interesting thing. I'm no connoisseur of fantasy and SF, but when you watch *Lost in Space* or whatever, it's a very sealed little society – there are only ....

**SW:** The original *Lost in Space* has only, what, six or seven regular characters?

**GD:** So that's very controllable. Whereas you embed them in a society, which is to me much more interesting.

**SW:** I think I grew into that, as a writer. My first novel was about an isolated city confronted by an external force, so it was very much a story in a bubble.

**GD:** There's that story about Adelaide ...

**SW:** 'The Ghosts of the Fall' ...

**GD:** ... when Adelaide's flooded and everyone's living at the top of skyscrapers.

**SW:** Oh yes. In some ways this technique simplifies things in order to make a point that would otherwise be far too complicated to set up, for a short story. But then it's limited. There's nothing else I could tell in the world of 'Ghosts of the Fall', really, whereas I could

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**write stories set in the *Twinmaker* or *The Change* universes for the rest of my life, because they are such bigger, richer spaces to play in. There are still parts of *The Change* world I haven't been to yet. There are ideas for matter-transmitters that I haven't explored yet. Ideas just keep on coming.**

GD: Obviously it's not just happenstance – but it must be good to have that vein to work with.

**SW: Oh, it's wonderful. It's a bit like in historical fiction, discovering a particularly interesting culture, a particularly interesting character. I've been researching Douglas Mawson for a little while now, and there's so much stuff to write about.**

GD: I remember seeing you talk about Antarctica at the State Library one day. So you did a fellowship?

**SW: I did. I received the Australian Antarctic Division Arts Fellowship in 2017.**

GD: What's coming out of that?

**SW: I went down to Casey station with a view of writing an alternate history novel wherein Scott, Mawson and Shackleton go on a mission to Antarctica together, which they never did in real life, and stumble across a Martian fighting machine that landed off course. The Martian is the sole survivor of the War of the Worlds, because down there it's dry and it's very cold, just like Mars, and there are no microbes to kill it. When the explorers meet it in that context, this meeting raises all sorts of really interesting issues. Mawson is interested in the survivor as a scientist. Scott is interested in it as the enemy. Shackleton has his own perspective. And the story ensues.**

**I've written a couple of short stories riffing on this idea. 'The Second Coming of the Martians' is in a book called *War of the Worlds: Battleground Australia*, which came out last year. It's a great collection, with an introduction by Alex Proyas. My story has nothing to do with my original novel, but it is about a man in the present day, in Antarctica, meeting the last surviving Martian soldier on Earth and learning the true secret about both Martian invasions of Earth.**

**Antarctica is such an amazing, threatened place. I could write dozens of stories set there, too.**

GD: The setting. When I read about a world like that, in *The Change*, because of our reading diet for our whole lives, I tend to think this is some version of England, and I try to map it onto England, but that's Australian. There are little Australian hints in it. And I liked that. And then I read your intro to 'The Butterfly Merchant'. And then I read 'Reluctant Misty and the House on Burden Street'. Burden Street = Buxton Street, North Adelaide, and my great-grandparents lived on Buxton Street, and I started feeling a bit weird about that.

**SW:** Ah, that story about the 'haunting house'. You know, I never found the house that inspired that story again. It was 25 years ago or more, but I've often looked and I've never found it. I wonder if it's the one your great-grandparents lived in.

GD: So there was an actual house?

**SW:** Yes, I was walking or driving through North Adelaide, and I saw this amazing house, and I thought, I should write a story about this house.

GD: It just might have been knocked down. They bloody do that!

**SW:** Yeah. It's funny where stories come from. That one came from seeing that house and also mishearing 'reluctant mystic' on the radio and thinking she'd said 'reluctant misty' and those two things combined and eventually became the story.

GD: That's really creepy.

**SW:** I like that story.

GD: Yes, so did I!

**SW:** Thanks! It gave me an opportunity to dig around in old university archives, newspaper archives, a kind of research I wasn't used to doing very much of back then, because so much of what I write is made up or based on scientific or philosophical concepts rather than how journalists wrote in the *News* in 1932.

GD: So, the Australianness – do you think your international readers understand that? How hard do you work to try and let them know that?

**SW:** The very Australian books aren't widely published overseas, unfortunately. Sometimes, I wonder these books simply works best for Australians, or if the gatekeepers of American fantasy and SF are looking for a more traditional Eurocentric fantasy environment, or a combination of the two factors – or maybe the books just aren't good enough to get over that hurdle of alienness, Australianness. I don't know. But the readers I do have overseas have really liked them, and a lot of them don't realise it's Australian. A lot of them think it's Texas.

GD: Yes, that's what I'm thinking.

**SW:** There are clues. If you look at the map at the beginning of *The Stone Mage and the Sea*, you might realise that it's the eastern coast of the Eyre Peninsula, South Australia that has just been reversed. But most people won't notice that.

GD: I was trying to map it onto somewhere like Lincolnshire.



**SW:** Ah, you see, Fundelry is Cowell, which is where my mother grew up and where I spent a lot of time growing up. Cowell combined with Port Gibbon, where my grandfather used to take me to play in the sand dunes when I was young.

GD: The names somehow made me think of those Viking names from the east coast of Britain.

**SW:** Fundelry comes from Fundindelve, which is the place the wizard lives in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, one of my favourite fantasy novels. So this book, which is very Australian, borrows all these other elements, partly because I wanted to write a novel that felt very Australian to me but didn't appropriate any Indigenous stories or traditions, even though most of the characters in these books are black, or various shades of brown. I felt completely happy to draw on western traditions alone.

GD: I like the way you make whiteness the odd thing.

**SW:** That is a nod to Ursula Le Guin. The characters in her Earthsea books are mainly black too. And not for political reasons. Maybe it's slightly political. I think it comes from a political place, if that makes sense.

GD: It's just resetting the absolutely automatic assumptions that we make. And that's always a valuable thing to do, just a little bit of a double-take and you go with it.

**SW:** Clair, the main character of the *Twinmaker* books, is black but it's not really spelt out. The clues are there, again, but it's not overt until the second book when she's on the cover. It was at that point a couple of readers went, 'Oh! Of course she's black.' I loved that moment. She's totally black, she's black through and through, but that's not what the story is about. In this world, outsiders are those who don't use matter-transmitters, rather than the ones who are born with different skin colours.

GD: You know the other person who does that is Coetzee. In *Disgrace* you don't know. South Africans have said to me that Melanie is Cape Coloured. It went over my head, but if you are a South African you know all the nuances – everything that that means. And because of the name she has ....

**SW:** These extra layers are what make re-reading such a pleasure. Every time I revisit even an old favourite, there's a chance I'll pick up something new. You never cross the same river twice. It's one of the great things about literature.

GD: With a series, when you write the first one, how much do you know about what's going to happen after the end of the first one? You're setting out to write a series?

**SW:** Yes, I always knew what the final scene of the books of *The Change* would be. The core ideas came to me in a dream, and within a very short time I had titles for the first two books and a rough idea of where the story was going to go, including the ending. So I had that point

to aim for, while I was writing, and it landed just as I'd hoped. Maybe because the destination shapes the journey, so it was always going to.

The *Twinmaker* books weren't dissimilar. I knew where I wanted Clair and the world to be. The difference was that I hit the end of the *Twinmaker* books and I thought, Clair's journey is done, whereas with the *Change* books and I just knew that there was more to tell. Immediately, the idea of the prequel and the sequel trilogy fell into place. They're more adult books, much larger, much more complex, more characters, oh my god, so many characters! – but I loved writing those books.

Sometimes I reach the right ending but end up swapping what I thought the plot was quite a bit along the way. And that's OK. No one needs to know. If anybody really wants to read the early drafts they're available from the University of Queensland. I don't recommend it, but some of them are quite revealing, personally and in terms of process. For my first published novel, *Metal Fatigue*, I knew everything in detail, chapter by chapter, before I started writing, and as a result I got bored three-quarters of the way through and didn't want to finish. For my second novel I thought, well I won't make that mistake; I knew what the final scene was but I didn't know anything else, and I got lost and went up all manner of dead ends. I have developed a second sense now, of when I've got enough material to get started. My subconscious reveals that to me when the voice of the story comes alive and I start writing the first page.

GD: So, YA versus adult. What's the difference? Because as a reader I often think, why is this YA? I'm just reading it like a grown-up, like whoever I am.

**SW:** *The Stone Mage and the Sea* was marketed as adult fantasy because YA wasn't a big category then. If it came out now, it would definitely be marketed as YA. *Twinmaker* was marketed as YA, and needed to fit into what market expectations of YA are.

So I agree, there's nothing in these stories that doesn't make them suitable for adults. They're perfectly viable for adults, because adults like reading stories of discovery and change and emotional turmoil just as much as teenagers do. It doesn't matter what age the protagonists are. But there are different gatekeepers for different categories. If you're writing for a YA market, you've got to write something that the majority of librarians will be happy putting in their school libraries, say – and things like explicit sex, explicit violence, lots of bad language usually won't fly. They can still be in there, but it might change the response you receive. *Impossible Music*, my latest book, is full of swearing and my editor didn't want to take that out, even if it means reaching a somewhat smaller audience. That was my editor in the United States, making that call; she didn't want to change the Australianness, and the swearing was part of that.

GD: That's really good, that an American editor is willing to keep the Australianness, because we keep hearing about American editors saying no, Americans won't understand ...

**SW: Well, if it would be a problem for the story if readers didn't understand a particular word or concept, I generally agreed to change or explain it – like winter school being in July, rather than December. You want to write in a way that won't trip up your readers.**

GD: In a way you're not tripping up that market, but you might be tripping up your Australian readers.

**SW: The Australian edition is a different edit, fortunately. My Australian publisher, Allen & Unwin, changed the Americanisms back to Australianisms and backed down the explanations. So the Australian edition is full-on Australian. Heaps Australian!**

**The same went for the audio book, which was made by an American audio book company. I really wanted an Australian to read it, which was no problem, but I thought it might be too persnickety to insist on someone from Adelaide, so I didn't ask. It turned out well anyway.**

GD: How much have your books been adapted to audio or film?

**SW: Probably about half of them have been adapted to audio. Quite a lot of them have been looked at for film. Not the big space opera ones, because they require big budgets, but all the matter-transmitter stuff has come under the microscope a few times. The *Books of The Change* have come close. And My story 'Passing the Bone' (in *Magic Dirt*) has been adapted into a feature film – the script's being shopped around at the moment. It'll be shot in South Australia, if it happens. But nothing's actually made it to the screen yet, apart from a short film of 'Among the Beautiful Living Dead' was made by a bunch of student film-makers, and that was really cool.**

GD: I can see that they would have fun with that.

**SW: Yes, they did. They added all this wonderful visual imagery. It was extraordinary. I also had a play adapted from 'Team Sharon' at University of Adelaide. That was great too. It's really interesting to see what people bring to adaptations of these kind.**

GD: It's such a huge thing. I know a few film-makers. It's such a huge undertaking. To get a film actually up and made. It's decades, and money! And when you think you can just sit at your computer and write a whole world ...

**SW: For a book to be published and then to do well, there are a few times where the dice rolls and randomness comes into play. But when you're making a film or a TV series the dice rolls all the time! I enjoy writing scripts and I love working with my TV and film collaborator and I really hope we get something up and running, but she teaches at a university like me, and we have all sorts of weird deadlines and we don't get together as often as we'd like, alas.**

GD: Do you mind me asking why did you come to Flinders?

**SW:** I've been writing full time as a professional self-supporting writer for twenty years. Then Lisa Bennett, an old friend of mine who I'd taught briefly, contacted me to say she was going on maternity leave and said, 'I really want you to come in, I want my students to be in good hands, I think you'll love them. And I really want you to stay at Flinders afterwards, I want to work with you. I think you would like the environment here. You'd love all the other creative teachers and artists around.' And I was saying, no, no, I swore I'd never have a real job again.' This was while I was in Dublin leading the writer's life. Why would I have to go to work anywhere apart from my home office? Eventually, she wore me down.

Partly because there are natural ups and downs in every writing career. I was going through a little bit of a dip, thanks to chronic pain caused by repetitive strain injuries, and I wasn't as massively productive as I used to be. This seemed like something stimulating I could for a while instead. So I signed up to teach 0.5 this year [2019], and immediately, genuinely liked it. Everything Lisa said about the students is true, everything Lisa said about my colleagues is true, and despite (or because of) Flinders having just gone through a massive restructure and everything still being very much in a state of flux, there are wonderful opportunities here. One of them was the ongoing position that came up, which I applied for and was offered. I'm a little bit nervous about going full-time, but I've pretty much been working full time this last semester, so I suspect it'll be all right.

This position frees me up to do a bunch of interesting things – interesting to me and I hope to other people – that haven't been financially viable until now. I want to turn my PhD exegesis into a short book. I want to do some critical work in the area of music, which is my other love. And I'll still write creatively, just slower than before. Because I'm working in a different environment now, I can do these things and still support myself financially.

**GD:** I see what you're saying. You traded time for money in a way. Well that's one way of putting it.

**SW:** I've traded pressure – I mean there's still pressure, but there's a lot less pressure of a particular kind.

**GD:** It's more structured pressure?

**SW:** Yes, exactly. The tasks are clearer. As long as I'm teaching students and grading students and helping them pass while at the same time producing a certain number of other outcomes, I don't have to worry whether I'm going to starve next year. I realise now that after so long on the creative treadmill, of every second of every day being worried about how this book would do, or how the next book would sell, or how am I going to fit in this short story, or have I done enough promotion – endless series of anxiety-producing questions: Have I travelled enough? Do I have to go back to America to boost my profile? All that anxiety-inducing chatter! This incredible weight has come off my shoulders.

GD: Yes. I made the kind of opposite flip and retired and so now my time is my own – I have to make my own structure. There's plenty to do, but sometimes I feel as though I'm floundering. And so it is a different way of being, being sort of self-directed.

**SW: I did find that after some years of being a self-employed gadabout I began looking for structure in terms of being on boards of things like Writers SA or Big Book Club, arts grants and so on. It gave me deadlines and it got me out of my cave.**

It's nice, too, to have new challenges. Whole new systems to learn. And paperwork! It's so stimulating! It's a holiday. I'm sure in 2 or years I'll be just as jaded as everybody else professes to be, but at the moment it's like, here's a problem and I've got to learn a new solution to it. I'm extraordinarily lucky to have this opportunity.

GD: Right. It's time to talk about Jane Austen. That's why I'm here. We've talked for 55 minutes and I haven't mentioned Jane Austen yet.

**SW: Oh yes! It all happened because I mentioned that I read her and that she inspired me ...**

GD: Because you were looking for ways to write *Impossible Music* and she helped you.



**SW: Yeah. The voice of *Impossible Music* is very much my voice, but it wasn't coming out right at first. There was a spark missing. This took place in that period when I wasn't very well. Instead of writing, I was doing a lot of reading. One day, I picked up *Sense and Sensibility* and I liked it so much. Then *Pride and Prejudice*, when her voice really kicks in, and her writing is much more polished – her writing just started to trip neurons in my head. And then *Mansfield Park* – I just love *Mansfield Park*!**

GD: Isn't it fabulous!?

**SW: Oh, it's so – I was just reading this book in raptures of joy because it was so long and so interesting ...**

GD: And I just think Fanny Price is her most interesting character. And a lot of people just say, oh no, she's so prissy, but she's just crazy really, she's almost a psychopath.

**SW: And the book is so racy!**

GD: And what a lot of people don't get is the disjunct between Fanny and the narrator – the narrator is sympathetic to Fanny, she's channelling through Fanny, but there's this outside voice all the time, operating. I can just keep coming back to *Mansfield Park*. People keep asking

me that annoying question, which is your favourite Austen novel? And my answer nowadays is, when I want to write, I keep coming back to *Mansfield Park*.

**SW: I think I will too. Anyway, Austen's work was stimulating my own writing and when I ran out of her books I had to move on to someone else. So I went from her to Wilkie Collins, who has some really interesting female characters and can also be quite funny.**

GD: I haven't read Wilkie Collins for decades but I read them all when I was a teenager and it's fabulous.

**SW: Some of his stories are just brilliant, and his leads can be so prickly and even modern, at times.**

GD: *The Woman in White*! That description of her.

**SW: Yes, such a great character. I eventually moved from Wilkie Collins to Georgette Heyer and oh man! I never looked back. I spent a whole year reading just Georgette Heyer. Because she again is so funny, with smart heroines, interestingly flawed love interests, and that incredible sense of the Regency period which I just didn't want to leave.**

GD: Which is all in *Impossible Music* ...!

**SW: Not at all in *Impossible Music*, true, but it's all through my next book, *Her Perilous Mansion*, which is a middle grade fantasy novel set in a magical sort of 19<sup>th</sup> century, featuring a big mansion that's an amalgam of all the stately homes I visited in Ireland. Heyer is all through that one.**

In general, what I find is that when I'm writing I need to be reading something that makes me write better. Not necessarily in the same style or mode, though. What I got out of Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer were things like sentence construction, to look at one specific thing. I spent a lot of time earlier in my career trying to be the clear pane of glass of many SF novels: no style, no colour, just the conduit for the story. Perhaps I became too used to being that, and I needed to be reminded of other was. These authors' beautiful turns of phrases, and wonderful preposterous sentences, really helped me write more joyously in general.

GD: Of course Iris Murdoch is a really good one for preposterous sentences.

**SW: Oh yes. Another beautiful writer! Reading funny books was important, too. Heyer's characters are quippy and unpredictable and mad and I think that helped *Impossible Music* become the book I wanted it to be. I didn't want to write a comedy but I did want to create a fictional space in which people could exhibit natural instances of humour. It would have been easy for *Impossible Music* to be a really depressing novel, and I definitely did not want that. Jane Austen's books aren't depressing, and neither are Georgette Heyer's or Wilkie Collins', despite the terrible things that happen in them. They're great fun.**

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**I wanted to write a serious book that was also great fun. There are lots of other things in *Impossible Music* that contributed to that. The mad timelines, the band names, the strange conversations with people online, the lyrics – all that stuff is makes it fun for me, in the hope that other people will enjoy it too.**

GD: Yes, absolutely. So is *Impossible Music* YA? Is it marketed as YA?

**SW: I asked me editor, ‘do you think it is YA,’ and she said, ‘absolutely definitely’. But it is a book that is very relevant to adults as well. We want to get it out to both audiences.**

GD: The things that concerns me is that if it’s marketed as YA that will put off a whole adult readership.

**SW: Yes, I know, that concerns me too. But it you market it as adult it doesn’t make it into schools.**

GD: They could market *Mansfield Park* as YA – Fanny’s 18.

**SW: Yeah, and there’s a push to do that with some older novels. Kids can really benefit from stories like these. We hope that *Impossible Music* will become a book that is read in schools, because there are lessons in there for young readers. That wasn’t how I wrote it, though. I wrote *Twinmaker* consciously as a YA novel, but I wrote *Impossible Music* without any market in mind. If nobody had bought it, I would have tried to rewrite it for that market, but at the time I was writing it for myself and the voice I chose was just for me, as an experiment.**

**This is my first published first-person novel, first realist novel, a whole bunch of new things for me, and to get past the first-person problem – because I always want to know why – why are they telling it to me? Why have they written it down? It’s completely implausible, first person. The origin of the voice I chose was that it was Simon’s internal voice speaking, saying the things that he didn’t know how to articulate. That way, I could use words and concepts and phrases that he would never be able to say aloud, because some of these understandings are pre-articulate, pre-language. This enabled me to go into territories that I wouldn’t have been able to otherwise.**

GD: I think Iris’s great first-person novels do that. The three big 1970s ones, *The Sea, the Sea*, *The Black Prince* and *A Word Child*. They’re brilliant. I think maybe they’re my favourites. There’s so much in them. And that rhetorical position is one of the things – she does create a rhetorical position for *The Black Prince* – she explains what’s happening. It’s totally implausible, actually, if you really think about it, but it doesn’t matter.

**SW: This comes back to the question of plausibility.**

GD: It doesn’t matter, because immediately, on the first page, you’re hooked in, and it pulls you in.

**SW: The one where the student jumps out the window ...**

GD: The Good Apprentice.

**SW: Is that first person or third?**

GD: That's third.

**SW: Wonderful. It's such a close third that my memory is that it's first.**

GD: There are several focalising characters in that one as well as Edward.

**SW: I really must revisit her work. One of the reasons I dropped Wilkie Collins and went to Georgette Heyer was because I had been making a much more conscious effort to read books by women. A few years ago there was that public effort to track who you were reading and try and make the gender ratio 50/50. I was really annoyed with myself when I started tracking my books in Goodreads; I thought I'd read tons of books by women that year, and I realised only afterwards that I'd reached barely 50/50. I sound like an old white dude, and I guess I am, but this really opened my ideas to reading practices. So now, when I'm choosing who I'm going to read next, I'll always if possible choose a woman first.**

**So I read Wilkie Collins till I found Georgette Heyer and then I read Georgette Heyer for an entire year, except for one Lee Child book. And that was the only book by a man that I read in all of 2017.**

GD: Well you've got a year's worth with Iris.

**SW: That's what I'm thinking.**

GD: She wrote 26 novels – one a fortnight. And then there's the philosophy as well ...

**SW: Iris might be my next one. In fact, I've got another first-person YA novel that I'm struggling with a bit, and I wonder if reading Iris is exactly what I need to get over this hurdle. Maybe 2020 will be my reading Iris year. I'm reading an Agatha Christie at the moment, though, and I've got a whole bunch of Dorothy Sayers to read.**

GD: She's great, too.

**SW: Oh, she's so fantastic. The Wimsey books, and Harriet Pynel**

GD: And funny!

**SW: So smart. And I've been listening to a podcast by Caroline Crampton called 'Shedunnit' which is all about Golden Age Crime written by women and every podcast there's a list of books that I want to read. Just wonderful.**

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GD: We've talked a little bit about short stories – the difference between writing them and writing a novel. So I've been reading *Magic Dirt*. 'The Seventh Letter'. I mean, how bloody clever is that? No present participles until the last paragraph!

**SW: No 'G'. Yes, that's right – oh man, that was a hard one to write! I'm glad you like that story. It's the only time I've ever tried writing a lipogram. It was very hard.**

GD: I kept thinking, has he left out all the Gs? And I'd look back and I couldn't find any.

**SW: In the copyedits before the story was published the copyeditor inserted a G – I'm glad we caught that! That would have been really annoying. I can't remember where that idea came from. I was probably reading about strokes in the *New Scientist* and I thought wouldn't it be fun to do something with language. Then I didn't know how to finish it and so the idea for the weird society came to me, and I thought, that works.**

GD: Yes, that works.

**SW: I wasn't then used to writing stories that were that short. Or writing stories for a mainstream audience.**

GD: And then there's that nice little Poe reference in there.

**SW: Oh I love Poe. In the books of *The Change* there are Poe references everywhere. I just love referencing his work. I wrote a space opera trilogy once in which each book is based loosely around a different Gothic novel or short story; the first one is *Melmoth the Wanderer* and the second one is *Jekyll and Hyde*, and the third one is a Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It's so mad and so beautiful.**

GD: Do you know that he was one of the first English-language authors published by Pleiades edition in French, translated into French?

**SW: Isn't that wonderful?**

GD: Before Jane Austen – she came really much much later – and even before Shakespeare. But it's weird for us to think that, of all the authors – Pleiades being the very serious publishing house where 'we will present the classics' – Poe was one of the first.

**SW: Good on them. He was so bold and unhappy and his poetry is sometimes achingly beautiful and full of yearning, incredibly powerful in so few words, it's quite extraordinary. We take it for granted, you know, like Mark Twain and so many other writers, they're so familiar we don't think how great they were at the time. Austen too. Or even Iris Murdoch, being such an amazing prolific writer, in such an era for women.**

GD: You know what it took to make me realise what a poet she is? There's this crazy book called *Cartography for Girls*.

**SW: Yes, you told me about this!**

GD: All these sentences from the novels sorted into alphabetical order. So you're reading them just for the words, for the rhythm of the sentences.

**SW: That's wonderful. I could never be that brave. But sometimes you do end up doing mad things. I once remixed Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, using his own phrases to create haiku and renga that charted the evolution of the haiku form, chapter by chapter. How, why did I end up doing that? That was one of those projects where my wife said, why are you wasting so much time on this? You're not going to be paid for it even if it gets published. But I was really enjoying it. Such a strange thing – so different from all the novels I've written. It did get published, thankfully. That was a bonus.**

GD: Surely those experiments – you don't know why or what –but they're always worth doing.

**SW: When I was living off my writing for 20 years, I always had to have something that was just for the love of it. Maybe one day it would be published, and maybe it wouldn't, it didn't matter. Every weird thing was stretching me a little bit, creatively, technically.**

GD: That's the thing. If you just keep churning ...

**SW: You get stuck. You become Wilbur Smith. There's nothing wrong with Wilbur Smith, of course, but I would too easily become bored writing in the same genre or mode, over and over. That's why still like writing short stories, particularly flash fiction, because you can try all sorts of things without investing too much time in them. I've got a piece of flash fiction that's just come out, for instance. 'The Misadventures Tom Jones, Time Traveller – being a dialogue between two hemispheres of the author's brain that is neither fruitful nor uncommon' was inspired by a dream of *Tom Jones* – the Fielding Tom Jones, not the singer. It gave me this idea for a time travel story but I couldn't get it to work. But I was thinking this kind of works as a dialogue. Maybe I'll write it that way as best I can and see if I can sell that, and I did. You can experiment much more easily when you're not throwing a year of your life into every little thing.**

GD: There's a sentence in 'Evermore' that really blew my mind. It was 'We only believe we speak in languages: underneath the pretence, it's all the same machine code.'

**SW: I'd forgotten that line. That's said by somebody living in a virtual environment, I think? It's literally true for them, but maybe underneath for all of us it's the same chemical code. That's a powerful thought.**

GD: We're so used to the idea that language is defining.

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**SW: In the Chomsky sense. Maybe it is.**

GD: I went to the Irish conference last week, and I went to the Irish language day run by Dymphna Lonergan, who's an expert in the Irish language, and a literature teacher. These passionate people who were not going to let their language go, so they're reviving it. They're so passionate about language. And of course the Aboriginal people are in the same position too.

**SW: And Aboriginal sign language, too.**

GD: So I wondered if that's a future that's possible, where we don't speak in languages. There are basic concepts that you can easily translate, maybe, but there's so much that's untranslatable – you come across a word, and you wonder what does that exactly mean? – it's so hard to get the right phrase.

**SW: The right understanding.**

GD: What's transferable and what's lost. And if you've just something that's machine code ... Well we've got it, I guess. We've got machine code.

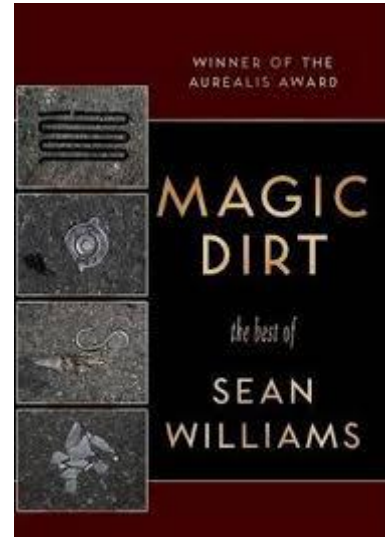
**SW: And we're using machines to communicate literally mind to mind now. What does that mean for conveying direct experiences of things like *red* from person to person? What will that overturn in our understanding of ourselves and our own individuality? The line you quoted is basically just saying, underneath our skin our blood's the same colour, it's that same philosophical idea. One of the things I love about writing SF is that it gives you a different tool box to explore those same ideas.**

I've had stories translated into various languages and some of them have been nominated for awards in those languages. I often wonder how they compare. I mean, I can read a little bit of French but I haven't read any of my novels translated into French.

GD: It's always interesting hearing from translators. There's often a translators' panel at a Coetzee conference, for example. Translating Coetzee into Chinese. Wow.

**SW: Or Icelandic. Amazing. What a challenge.**

GD: As I was reading *Magic Dirt* I kept wanting to ask you how you live with these rather grim futures you imagine. It's not only individual deaths – a few times you actually say, 'I died!' – and devastating stories like 'Passing the Bone', but the future for the planet and the human race that you envisage. Does writing about it help, or do you feel as uneasy about it all as you make me feel?



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**SW:** Sometimes writing can be therapy. *Impossible Music* was definitely like that. But in this specific kind of story, for me, I don't think so. My early work is full of grim futures, maybe because I was young and the future looked full of possibilities, good and bad. Playing with the question 'what's the worst that could happen?' is like watching a horror movie, when you know you're perfectly safe once the credits roll. These days, though, with so many formerly fictional scenarios playing out in the real world, well, it doesn't feel so safe anymore, that kind of mental game. It is often very depressing, like having the TV show *Years and Years* playing out in your head all the time. So now I gravitate towards stories with a more personal focus, perhaps responding to my own issues. Like, how do I cope with such-and-such rather than how do I survive it or not? Because day-to-day coping is often harder than getting out of a crisis alive. It takes more energy, mental and physical. It's the long-haul. Every writer probably faces something like this at some point: when they tackle their first novel, or making an actual career in publishing. Dreams are well and good. When they become real, everything changes.

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