

Interview with Alan Robbins, author of *Stories at the Edge of Time*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Alan Robbins, who is here to talk about his new short story collection “Stories at the Edge of Time.”

Alan Robbins is the author of 19 mystery, puzzle, humor, and trade books and was the winner of a New York State NEA/CAPS award for fiction in 1984. His essays on technology have appeared in Newsweek and in The New York Times. He is currently working on a series of science fiction mystery novels of which his latest, An Interlude in Dreamland, won a 2006 Writer's Notes Honorable Mention Award for new fiction. In addition, Alan is a graphic artist and teaches design at Kean University in New Jersey where he is the Janet Estabrook Rogers Professor of Visual and Performing Arts.

Tyler: Welcome, Alan. I’m glad you’re here to talk about your new book. The concept and reality of time have always fascinated me. Will you tell us what made you decide to write an entire collection of stories focusing on time?

Alan: I think time fascinates everyone. Besides digestion, it’s the one universal truth about life that we feel in our gut. We know it intensely, but it still remains a great mystery. Perfect fodder for a writer. But you know, I didn’t really decide to write about it at all. I simply set out to tell entertaining stories about people facing the future with the usual mix of trepidation and hilarity. Stumbling and striving. Yet when I was done telling my little tales, it became clear that they were, in fact, haunted by time. I suppose that means that I am too. Luckily ghosts can be funny as well as ghostly.

Tyler: Alan, what does time mean to you?

Alan: Wow. That’s a big question and I’m not sure I can answer it. I wrote a story once in which the entire universe from beginning to end, big bang to big fizzle and everything in between, occurred in the blink of an eye of a baby just born on the next level up. And then it blinks again. Time is vast when you think about it but slender as a wish as you live it. There’s something sad and also funny about that dislocation. I like Hermann Hesse’s line “eternity is a mere moment, just long enough for a joke.” But does that answer your question? No, I don’t think so.

Tyler: What genre would you define the stories as being? Because they deal with time, does that make them science fiction, or do you mix different genres in the stories?

Alan: I wondered about that for a long time because I wrote the stories before deciding where they fit. As people asked me about them, and about my last two novels which fall into the same genre, whatever it is, I kept trying on different answers. Mystery science fiction, sci-fi mysteries, future tales, speculative fiction. Technically the last is probably most accurate because they take familiar people, emotions, and situations and thrust them into speculative futures. But they also deal with the impact of future technologies and that makes them science fiction too.

Tyler: Did you intend for the stories all to be part of this collection when you wrote them, or did the idea of the collection come later?

Alan: No, not a collection, I never thought of it. In fact, the stories were not even speculative tales at first. They were simply stories about people coping. Then my wife, Trudy Smoke, who is an English professor at Hunter College here in New York and my advisor and muse said to me “why don’t you set these stories in the future.” I have no idea why she said that but I always listen to her. The idea blasted them into a new direction in which I could alter the world as well as the characters and see what happened. That’s when they started to cohere into a collection.

Tyler: Are the stories serious or humorous? Can time be both comical and sad?

Alan: You know I honestly don’t know the difference between them. I’m not being coy here...life has always seemed to me to be equally tragic and hilarious. At the exact same time. A “tragedy is just comedy without the tears” kind of thing. It’s probably the same way comedians view the world, making jokes about the most painful moments, making you laugh so hard you cry. I think you just gave me an idea for a new story...deadpan aliens come here and are so confused by this contradiction in us that they leave in a snit.

Tyler: Do the stories share a theme or message beyond the connection with time?

Alan: Well, they all share my interests and concerns as a writer of course. Some of which I consciously focus on and some of which seep in anyway no matter what I do. A fascination with the future of technology, for example, and how this will affect our relationships with each other. Questions about what makes us human in a world in which this term is increasingly flexible. An understanding that fate trumps desire and that hope is both eternal and pointless. And my own particular sense of humor and fun with words.

Tyler: Tell me more about how you think the future of technology will affect our relationships with each other?

Alan: I think the trend was there right from the start, from the very first sharpened stone we could use to share some meat or slaughter a rival. I’m confident that we’ll keep using our technology to realize our human potential, for better and for worse.

Tyler: Alan, are there any particular authors that have influenced you?

Alan: Like any serious artist (or thief for that matter), I try to steal from everything good. But there’s a small group of writers that I really love like Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Kurt Vonnegut. I’m not in that league of course, but I am in the bleachers cheering.

Tyler: I’m surprised by your list because those authors aren’t generally thought of as science fiction authors? What about their writings appeal to you or have influenced you in your own writing?

Alan: You’re right...I guess I should put Philip Dick and Stanislaw Lem in there for sci-fans reading this. To me, these are writers who don’t feel constrained by convention and are willing to play with language itself. They use humor to charm readers into a kind of gentle submission. They create speculative but familiar worlds in which surprising things can happen. They also invest their stories with a great humanity. All of which appeals to me as a reader and writer.

Tyler: Our reviewer, Olivia Baumgartner-Jackson, said she enjoyed all the stories in the book but her particular favorite was “The Edge of Time.” Will you tell us more about that story?

Alan: That story was featured on Amazon Shorts before the book was published and it got quite a great response. That’s why it is the first story in the book and sets the tone for the rest. It’s about a family on a starship hurtling through the expanding cosmos on a path to nowhere that they call the Running. They’re running from a second Big Bang that is going to swallow the universe; they know they can’t outrace it so they are just trying to postpone the inevitable. Then these very rational and technical people discover an ancient artifact on board—a book—filled with stories about people who lived ages ago in a place called Brooklyn. With nothing else to do, they begin to read the stories in the book and slowly notice that this is having an impossible effect on the world. You’ll have to read the story to find out what I mean but it’s about how stories may just save us.

Tyler: Alan, do you feel your stories save you? Do you write for pleasure or as a type of therapy?

Alan: Red Smith is usually quoted as saying, “Writing is easy. I just open a vein and bleed.” That has nothing to do with my answer; I just like it. Writing is all of that to me and probably to most writers. Salvation, distraction, struggle, exposure, pleasure, therapy. Writing fiction—as opposed to essays or even graphic art for that matter—is the form of expression that comes the closest to divulging who I am, even to me. Maybe because stories are how we think, and words are how we know.

Tyler: What makes you sit down to write a story?

Alan: It almost always starts with an image I get in my head that contains a contradiction. A standoff between two men; one is there to seek revenge but his beliefs prevents him from harming anyone. What does he do? That was the basis for a story in the book called “Mamu and Red Snow.” The more I fantasize about it, the more details get added and eventually I can’t remember them all so I have to write them down and stitch them together into a story. If there are too many to tell in a short story, they become a novel.

Tyler: Alan, I find the book’s cover very intriguing. What is the message you want it to convey to the reader?

Alan: I’m glad you liked that because, as a graphic designer, covers matter a lot to me. I design and illustrate them myself and try to make them project the mood and tone of the story or stories inside. In the case of “Stories at the Edge of Time,” it’s an existential landscape—that’s a fancy word for blank—filled with a few figures and objects like pieces on a gameboard. I guess I felt that it accurately reflected the enduring but playful sense of the stories themselves.

Tyler: Besides writing, you have been very interested in puzzles and mysteries. Would you tell us a little bit about your mystery jigsaw puzzles?

Alan: I was a game and puzzle designer for many years, including puzzle books, board and card games, and work for Games magazine. But the mystery jigsaw puzzles you mention are a whole other story. A company called BePuzzled hired me to write short mysteries to go with jigsaw puzzles. You read the story, put the puzzle together, study the image on it, and solve the crime. I wrote and designed 25 puzzles for them. Here’s the amazing thing. There are hundreds of thousands of fans of these puzzles worldwide, making me one of the most-read mystery writers, at least by my calculation. Even now years after they stopped being published, the puzzles are sold actively through ebay and other online vendors. I still get a few emails each week from fans telling me how much they enjoy the puzzles. Incredible.

Tyler: You not only designed your puzzles, but you have also been a graphic designer and teach design at the college level. How has this design background influenced your writing? Do you think it allows you to see things in a different light?

Alan: As a creative process, writing is actually very similar to design. You take your challenge, assemble your tools and raw materials, play around with them, move stuff this way and that, finish it up, and voila...a final product. Well maybe not that simple but it is similar. Design deals with shapes, colors, images; writing with words, sounds, silences. But rhythm, balance, surprise, flow...these are all part of making something whether it is a novel or a poster. Also, in both cases, you have to be organized, focused, and paced. And learn to keep making tiny adjustments all along the way.

Tyler: Besides “Stories at the Edge of Time” you have written several other science fiction and mystery novels. Will you tell us about your other writing and where “Stories at the Edge of Time” fits into it?

Alan: This collection is a continuation of the themes of my two earlier novels “A Small Box of Chaos” and “An Interlude in Dreamland.” The difference is that the novels are part of a series (there will be two more) called Near Future Mysteries. Each one takes place one decade later than the last, starting in 2020. In that series I am trying to explore how the technology of instant visual communication evolves and what impact this change will have on us. “Stories at the Edge of Time” has no such restraint and in that sense the tales in that book are far more speculative. I have another collection of stories that I’m working on which will have a similar range. So I guess the novels are more science fiction and the story collections will be more speculative. Hey, I didn’t realize that until just now.

Tyler: What is next for you Alan?

Alan: More of the same, I hope. Teaching my classes in visual communications at Kean University, a great school. An extensive digital graphics project I've been involved in for many years. I've also been making YouTube videos that have gotten over half a million hits, so I guess I will continue with that too. And of course, writing more fiction. My next book is done and it's called "Following the Trail of Blood." You'll never guess what it's about...time travel of course. The hero slips back in time and has to solve the greatest crime of the 17th century. It's based on a true story and a great deal of historical research. Should be entertaining.

Tyler: If our readers are interested, where on YouTube can they locate your videos?

Alan: They can put in the key sentence "world's funniest dinner trick," and they'll get to the four videos in the series. But I should offer a word of warning...these videos are immensely silly. Not at all like my books. There's a big difference between humor and outright insanity. But I guess the videos do say something about what I'm willing to do to entertain.

Tyler: With your interest in technology and communication, why do you think YouTube has such a great appeal to people?

Alan: Because we want to communicate as fully as possible with each other, even when we don't want to. Each new round of technology gives us more and more of the realities of life to pack into our messages. The video explosion—of which YouTube and teensy cameras are a part—is the latest in this revolution. Just go to Times Square in New York City and you'll see the future: videos have completely taken over from still images, not to mention reality itself. I predict that this will be the case in our interpersonal communication as well. Just wait until they add smell to the mix.

Tyler: As an author, how has technology changed how you write?

Alan: Completely. Not only the obvious mechanics—inserts, deletions, cut and pasting, instant web research, and all that—but also style. The whole speed of change has swayed me towards shorter sentences, a punchier style, the use of fragments to get to the point faster. Also, I'm writing about the future and so have to keep on top of the latest breakthroughs. That's a big challenge by the way; one day it's in my head as some wild speculation, the next day I'm reading about it in "Discover" magazine.

Tyler: Thank you, Alan, for joining me today. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they might find there?

Alan: My website is alanrobbins.com. It has all my books, games, puzzles, graphics, and lots of free stories and cartoons to download. Thanks for that final plug, Tyler, and thanks for the interview. It's really been a lot of fun.

Tyler: Thank you, Alan. I hope time is good to you so we have many more of your stories to read.

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