

“Science fiction is the realism of our time”

Keith Harvey in conversation with science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson

Abstract

Kim Stanley Robinson, affectionately known as 'KSR' by his literary fans, is an award-winning American sci-fi author of more than 20 books with a committed following. His novels tackle current economic, social and environmental issues using the science fiction genre to explore future possibilities. Through his books, KSR considers present-day policy settings that might make better economic futures and avoid climate catastrophes.

His works are acclaimed for their intellectual depth, scientific rigour and detail, environmental advocacy, complex characters and social dynamics, as well as their utopian visions and insightful social commentary.

*His most recent novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) imagines a near future where the world is grappling with the escalating consequences of climate change – which are now bearing down upon us - and an international ministry is set up to navigate the complex politics, social upheavals and technological developments necessary to deal with this crisis.*

Key words

Science fiction writing, political economy, utopian literature, alternative economic practice, social change, climate crisis, cooperative work enterprises, wage and income equality, work.

Introduction

In this interview with KSR, Keith Harvey, co-editor of the *Journal of Work and Ideas*, asks the sci-fi master about using fiction to explore social and political ideas, and about some of the most intriguing ideas in his novels. These include his exploration of alternative economic systems, here and on Mars and other planets, worker co-operatives, and the meaning of work. Get ready for a highly technical and creative deep dive into the political economy of the future through science fiction, a genre which, as KSR claims in the interview, suffers perhaps unfairly from elitist literary prejudice but which he sees as the 'realism of our time'.

Note: worker co-operatives, which are referred to in this interview, are enterprises which are owned and run by the people who work in them on a 'one person, one vote' basis. A large-scale example of cooperatives is found in the Basque region of Spain operating under the umbrella of the Mondragon Corporation, a federation of industrial, financial, retail and education cooperatives which dominate the economy of the region. In his novel 2312, KSR imagines a number of extra-terrestrial worlds which operate according to Mondragon principles.

Why science fiction?

Journal of Work and Ideas (JWI): The *Journal of Work and Ideas* published by the Australian Institute of Employment Rights, Inc. is intended to be a place for hosting debate and boundary-pushing ideas about work and social and economic policy, and to find new ways to engage the public in these questions. Your work is exciting because it seems to explore (often ambitious and even utopian) social

and economic policy issues through engaging science fiction. Can we discuss some of the specific utopian ideas and themes that you explore?

JWI: What drives you to explore these questions through fiction rather than in another genre and what are your thoughts on using fiction in this way? You have chosen to write ‘hard’ science-fiction. Sci-Fi is often derided as literature’s poor cousin, or sometimes as not even ‘proper’ literature at all. Why do you choose to write in this genre? What advantages do you think it has for a novelist interested in the issues that you are writing about?

Kim Stanley Robinson (KSR): *Science fiction is the realism of our time. I recognized this when I was young and it has only become more evident as the decades have passed. We call our time the Anthropocene because of the way science has allowed us to become a powerful force in this planet’s biosphere, and science fiction is precisely the genre that allows stories to explore these relationships—not just between individuals, and between individuals and society, but also among the relationships of these with their planet.*

Some people are still stuck in antiquated literary aesthetics based on insecure hopes for a feeling of superiority based on class differences, but all that died around 1970 with the rise of postmodernism, and now in the Anthropocene such people are looking somewhat pathetic, but that’s not my problem.

JWI: You have supported the term ‘science fiction’ as a good descriptor of the genre – as a combination of facts (science) and values (fiction). Your attachment to science is clear from your novels. What are the political, social and economic values that you think are most important in the world of today and the future?

KSR: *Belief in science as the most meticulous, honest and effective mode of interaction with the world; solidarity with other people and other living beings, understanding that we are all cousins and co-*

dependent in a most literal way; adequacy for all, and a wage ratio of one to ten at the most.

Sustainability and justice.

Economic systems

JWI: You have criticised present-day capitalism because of its concentration on the highest rate of return to shareholders ignoring 'negative externalities' including the impacts on people's lives and the earth's biosphere. Are these still the main challenges facing us today? What practical changes can be made to current economic systems?

KSR: *Yes, these are still challenges. We could institute progressive tax rates on both individuals and corporations, and on both incomes and assets. We could lower the discount rate to nearly zero. We could legislate green investments and full employment, with government as the employer of last resort, and a living wage for all.*

JWI: The AIER is particularly interested in employment justice issues (as well as those surrounding the environment and climate change). One employment issue you have mentioned is the wage ratio: the ratio of the lowest paid to the highest paid in an enterprise or sector. You have cited both the US Navy and the Mondragon cooperatives as entities with relatively flat wage ratios. Can you elaborate on why that is important in your view. Is income equality a major social and global issue?

KSR: *If there is a social floor of adequacy for all, then ten times that adequacy is already luxury, and no one needs more than that. When there is extreme inequality between humans in regards to wealth and security, then there is no sense of participation in society, and a strong awareness that a few are prospering at the expense of all the rest. Precarity is real, and the environmental damage caused by the richest 1% is stupendous both proportionally and in total. Really this is so obvious that the acceptance of the current gross inequality among people is a striking sign of hegemonic thinking, in which*

“capitalist realism” makes people feel “there is no alternative.” This is obviously wrong, so it must be admitted that living in a hallucinated ideology is quite possible. But not inevitable.

Cooperative models

JWI: You have called out the experience of the Mondragon Cooperatives as an example of an alternative form of economic organisation to modern transnational corporate capitalism. You have mentioned the Mondragon cooperative model in interviews but also explicitly in your novel *2312*. Apart from the wage ratio issue, do you see other employment and social benefits in the cooperative model as practiced at Mondragon or in other cooperatives?

KSR: *Yes, I do. These worker cooperatives empower employees by making them co-owners, and in many cases employees hire management for terms and then have to re-elect management after five years, so that labor hires capital, so to speak. The wealth created by a coop is shared by its workers rather than distributed out to shareholders. Social security is created by this, by tenure rights, and so on. Esprit de corps is measurably higher.*

JWI: Another alternative form of economic organisation you have referred to is the experience in the Indian State of Kerala. What interests you in what has been done in Kerala?

KSR: *A regular alternation of government between the Congress and the Indian communist party allows for a structured alternation of methods and views, and government extends far down into local councils and panchayats such that the state has well over a thousand governing bodies, with citizen participation that is gender balanced and very high.*

JWI: The Kerala and Mondragon economic models appear to come from completely contrasting sources: Mondragon is explicitly based on Catholic Social Teaching and the model was introduced into the Basque region [Euskadi] by a Catholic priest. Kerala on the other hand is more classically Marxist in

its approach. What do you see as the common features of these two models? Are there fundamental differences?

KSR: *Both models try to avoid the residual feudalism embedded in neoliberal capitalist practice.*

There are differences, but I am not sure they are fundamental. Both embed the market in social rules and guide their markets with government guardrails and controls.

JWI: In *Red Mars*, written a long time ago now, you present different views of how an economy might be structured. There are

- the Antarctic model [a non-money society based on the scientific research community with no private sector exploitation of resources];
- the Islamic Sufi model of 'reverent economics' in which citizens expect to give back more than they receive from economic activity;
- the eco-economics model [to give back to the environment to compensate for what is taken].

You have also written of economics as 'quantified ethics'. What ethical values do you think should embody our economic policies and systems today?

KSR: *The Mars novels do serve as a kind of experimental space where political economies of all kinds could be portrayed as coming into being. Now, as then, my hope is to portray systems that work better than ours, in a way that seems plausible enough to be suggestive for readers as they contemplate our own very imperfect world system. The values stay the same: equality, care, solidarity, one planet family.*

Climate change

JWI: Your recent novel *The Ministry for the Future* deals again with the effects of and choices faced by the world as a result of climate change. You wrote the book in 2019, now five years ago. It begins with establishment in 2025 of a new international agency to tackle climate change, shortly followed by a deadly heatwave in India. In 2024 there have been record temperatures in India and resulting deaths. How do you think the world is placed five years after you wrote *Ministry*? Are we in a better or worse place now than when you wrote it? What more still needs to be done?

KSR: *In many ways we are in a better place than when I wrote Ministry. I put a lot of this down to the pandemic, which served as a slap in the face to wake people up—of course it was worse than that, as one out of every thousand humans died from it. But it could have been worse, and now we all know the biosphere can kill us if we mistreat it. So climate change is being taken far more seriously now, and the green transition is making rapid progress. It isn't fast enough, and carbon emissions are still far too high to land us in a safe space. We have a desperate race in the next few decades, but there is now a sense that the race is on and is real, with real stakes. That's new, and important. Now we have to try even harder, but we know that.*

Utopian literature

JWI: You have had a deep interest in utopian literature and ideas. But you have also adopted the term ‘optopia’ as an alternative to utopia. What does that mean and what relevance does it have to our present and future economic, social and ecological choices?

KSR: *I thought I read the term “optopia” in the great feminist science fiction of Joanna Russ, but I can't find it in her pages any more. What I thought she meant was, “the best society we can hope to get to, given where we are right now.” It was a name for a certain kind of history, rather than a name for a desirable end state, which is what “utopia” usually connotes. So, we are in our moment*

and can't magically undo that. We have to start from where we are and improve in ways that don't break the system as we improve it. So I think it's a useful term, but also I think "utopia" itself is a useful term, since H. G. Wells redefined it in his utopian fiction to mean much the same thing as Optopia—simply a positive direction to history.

JWI: You have mentioned Edward Bellamy's 'future history' novel *Looking Backward 2000-1887* as an example of a novel that had social and political impact. *Ministry* has been described as a similar novel form to *Looking Backwards*, that of a 'future history' as well as a utopian novel. Incidentally, Bellamy's novel had significant impact in the labor union movement in Australia and Bellamy clubs existed here as well. A number of other left-wing authors have written utopian novels in the past including William Morris, H G Wells and others. What role does the utopian novel have today, if any?

KSR: *These important novels can make vivid in readers' minds a different kind of society, dispelling the fake power of capitalist realism which can capture our thinking. They are imaginative exercises, and what I've realized since Ministry came out is that readers are the co-creators of a novel, in that they have to devote time and imagination to making the sentences on the page come alive in their heads. It's a generous and creative act, much more so than watching a movie, so after reading such a novel the reader has to a certain extent had that experience—and this can have powerful effects when returning to this actual imperfect world. So, utopian novels have just as much importance now as ever, maybe more—we know science and people could make a very different world.*

Be sure to add Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed to your list of influential utopian novels, because it is probably the best of the whole lineage, in literary terms—a very powerful experience.

Also recall that many of these novels are trying to imagine the felt reality of socialist systems, especially democratic socialism. The power of Bellamy, Morris and Wells derives from the power of

the socialist movements of their time. They did not make these systems up out of their heads, they represented their own socialist politics in imaginative fictions.

The meaning of work

JWI: A key question in many utopian novels and ideas relates to the performance of work. Some writers have suggested that, even in utopia, some work may need to be done by ‘slaves’ or ‘bondsmen’. Others suggest that work – or most of it – can be eliminated by technology. Marx considered that humankind was defined by work. The Bible suggests that work/labour is a punishment arising from The Fall of Adam and Eve. More modern Christian thinking suggests that work can be creative and redemptive. In your opinion, will ‘utopia’ involve work as a dominant human activity and, if so, how can that work be structured to give it utopian or at least optopian characteristics?

KSR: *Good questions. I tend to think of work as a kind of useful contribution. It can give meaning to life and be one’s existential project. This would have to be the result of work becoming more than alienated wage labor—it would have to be something the worker had some control over, and benefit from, in order to make it such an existential project.*

It’s worth thinking over the idea that the name Labor in itself encodes a capitalist vision of people and work—it is a term that is part of a dualism, i.e. Capital/Labor. It might be better to call yourself a Workers’ Party, with the idea that everyone should be a worker in one way or another, in rough equality with all the rest. An end to capital, in other words, except as a name for useful reserves of infrastructure and money, belonging to all.

JWI: You have visited Australia in 1995 for the Science Fiction Convention. Australian Labor Politician Race Mathews has also been a prominent science fiction fan in Australia and also shares a

keen interest in the Mondragon Cooperative movement about which he has written extensively [*Jobs of Our own* and *Of labour and Liberty*]. Have you met Race Mathews and discussed these matters with him?

KSR: *No I have not. I visited Australia twice in the 1990s, and again in 2010, when I was the guest of honor at the World Science Fiction Convention, which that year was run by Australians in Melbourne. It was one of the greatest experiences of my professional life, and I have enjoyed all my contacts with the Australian science fiction community, and Australian publishing and bookselling people.*

JWI: Thank you for your time.

KSR: *Thanks for the good questions, and best of luck to your efforts.*

Declaration of interests

Nil

Kim Stanley Robinson’s books are published by Hachette and details are here:

<https://www.hachette.com.au/kim-stanley-robinson/>

Keith Harvey

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