

Mennonite in the Solar System: An Interview with Karl Schroeder

David Perlmutter and Donovan Giesbrecht, Winnipeg

Introduction

Rudy Wiebe, Miriam Toews, David Bergen, and Sandra Birdsell are all household names in the Mennonite community. Their works are reviewed regularly in our periodicals; their successes and prize news items evoke a quiet sense of pride even among critics. But, Karl Schroeder of Toronto, has anyone ever heard of him?

While Wiebe and company probe deep into the human condition past and present, Karl Schroeder looks to the universe and time beyond. Science Fiction captured Schroeder's attention from early on, and by the time he was 21 his own creations were getting significant attention, not in home town Brandon, Manitoba, or in the rest of the Mennonite community for that matter, but among the hardcore fans of Science Fiction.

Nearly twenty years and dozens of stories later, Schroeder's book *Ventus* (2001) was declared a *New York Times* "notable book." His next book, *Permanance* (2002), won Canada's top award for Science Fiction and fantasy, the Aurora Award. More recently, Schroeder has been recognized as an expert in "Forsight Studies," commissioned by National Defense Canada to write *Crisis in Zefra*, a novella-length story describing what military operations might be like in thirty years. But despite this success, not a word has appeared in the Mennonite press.

David Perlmutter, an aspiring Science Fiction writer and historian in Winnipeg, is helping to set this problem straight. As part of his recent work at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, Perlmutter interviewed Schroeder, just prior to the launch of Schroeder's latest book, *Sun of Suns* (2006). The piece is introduced and edited by Donovan Giesbrecht.

The Interview

Perlmutter: You were born in Brandon in 1962. Did you remain there while you grew up?

Schroeder: I grew up in Brandon, living there until my late teens. I lived in Edmonton, Winnipeg and Vancouver before moving to Toronto. We used to travel to the mountains on vacation every year, when I was a kid. It was really those trips that introduced me to the idea of a wider world.

Perlmutter: To what branch of the Mennonite faith did and/or do you and your family belong?

Schroeder: I was raised in the General Conference [today, Mennonite Church Canada] branch, part of the southern Manitoba community that arrived during the 1870s. The family tree goes back (on the Schroeder side) to the Danzig area of what was then Germany, and on my mother's side to the Ukraine. Our local community was full of stories of people's long treks to Canada; for instance, one gentleman who grew up in the village next to his childhood sweetheart; her family left Russia eastward, his westward. They circled the world, and one day met by chance on a village street in southern Manitoba. Of course, they married and lived happily ever after!

Perlmutter: When did you become interested in Science Fiction? What appealed to you about it?

Schroeder: My mother, Anna, had collected four linear feet of Science Fiction books in one bookshelf, with four feet of murder mysteries (mostly works by Agatha Christie) above that. My brothers and sister grew up mostly reading the mysteries, but I read the Science Fiction books. It was primarily Andre Norton, who wrote Young Adult stories. That was my formative reading.

Perlmutter: You mentioned A.E. van Vogt [an influential Winnipeg-born Mennonite Science Fiction writer from the 1940s], in the biographical profile on your website. Was he a big influence on you?

Schroeder: Actually no, because van Vogt rejected his roots and embraced a lot of absolutist ideas, much of it nonsense. His family were the Vogts; he added the 'van' in order to hide his German [Mennonite] background. He was a close associate of L. Ron Hubbard and very interested in Hubbard's project to design and run a new religion. And then, of course, van Vogt wrote

what we now call “golden age” Science Fiction, a very trashy type of pulp fiction that isn’t done anymore. My writing models have been people like Samuel Delany, Michael Ondaatje and Joseph Conrad – people who love language and write close to the impressionistic flow of human experience.

Perlmutter: You mentioned that you do consulting work. What field(s) do you do this in? Is this related to your academic background?

Schroeder: Lately I’ve been doing work in Foresight Studies. Foresight is not so much about being an expert on the future – a modern-day prophet – and more about using collaborative tools like workshopping, brainstorming, etc., to write a set of plausible scenarios. Basically, it’s the design of contingency plans. For instance, there was a complete plan in place more than five years ago about what to do if the New Orleans levees broke during a hurricane. The problem was, nobody referred to that document when the thing actually happened. In recent years I’ve participated in foresight studies on subjects such as the future of Canadian health care, education, general trends in Canadian society, and the future of our military.

Perlmutter: The Mennonite faith is strongly centered around a classical Judeo-Christian conception of morality. Have you found that this has impacted upon the way your characters behave and act?

Schroeder: What’s of fundamental importance to me about the Mennonite approach to morality is that, within the Anabaptist tradition, it’s acknowledged that human beings have to make moral decisions on their own. We have to decide, we don’t leave it up to distant authority figures to do that for us. What this means is that it is central to being a Mennonite to not make assumptions about people, about what’s right and wrong. Taking a doctrinaire, traditional approach to morality may be common in Mennonite circles, but if it is it’s a sign of laziness and not an approach that’s consistent with being a Mennonite. The difficult part of Christ’s morality is that it’s not about rules, it’s about considering other people and respecting individual cases. If it were about rules, he’d have written out a new set of tablets for us, but he didn’t. So my morality comes from the Sermon on the Mount, not the Ten Commandments. Being a Christian is about following Christ, not Moses. Christ came to

announce a new relationship between God and Man, but people don't seem to be learning about that relationship anymore.
Perlmutter: Do you retain a connection with your Mennonite ethnicity?

Schroeder: It's hard living in a big city like Toronto, especially when I'm traveling a lot to other major centers like Manhattan and Washington. My ethnicity is global these days, rather than being Canadian or Mennonite or anything else. It has to be, for the sort of work I do. Culture, and preserving your identity, is a big concern for me. My last novel, *Lady of Mazes*, dealt with the question of how to keep one's identity in an increasingly homogenized world of mass media and instant communications. Answer: it's hard, but it's important not to isolate yourself, to remain engaged with the rest of the world. This is a balancing act that we all have to perform.

Permuter: Thank you for giving me some of your time and attention, Mr. Schroeder. Again, I greatly appreciate it.

Conclusion

Interviewing Schroeder was an interesting experience. He is lucid, informative, and intelligent. Like many authors in the Science Fiction field, he understands and respects the genre's historical traditions while at the same time establishing an original point-of-view and style. His work is also characterized by a strong basis in morality, undoubtedly a legacy of his Mennonite roots.

Anyone interested in reading Schroeder's works should visit www.kschroeder.com for a complete biography, or look for his latest work *Sun of Suns* released to bookstores in October 2006.