

Rather than hear directly from our man Benford this issue, let's partake of

AN INTERVIEW OF GREGORY BENFORD

Kevin Anderson

About Benford's new novel,
Beyond Infinity

Kevin: I've heard of some amazing and innovative ideas for promoting science fiction books, Greg, but how in the world did you convince Buzz Lightyear to be your spokesman? I mean, everybody who watches *Toy Story* has got to know that Buzz is plugging your new novel when he yells "To Infinity -- and Beyond!"

Gregory: Lightyear is based on Buzz Aldrin, whom I know. Great guy! When he was writing an SF novel with John Barnes, I'd go over to his home a mile or so from mine in Laguna Beach. He loved being Lightyear! — but grouched good-humoredly about how he got no money from it.

But I haven't seen *Toy Story* even yet. So when my editor called up asking for a title, even though I was a long way from finishing the novel, I said, "What sort of title do you want?" Jamie Levine replied, "Something.....cosmic?" I pondered. "Big scale?" She jumped at that: "Yes!" I thought I'd make a joke, so said, "How 'bout, uh, *Beyond Infinity*?" Jamie squealed. "Great! Uh.....what's it mean?" I thought, came up with nothing, and said, "You.....really want it?" She was sure: "It'll make people think!"

Kevin: At least.

Gregory: Well, it sure made *me* think.

Kevin: Maybe people will think you're ... a little crazy?

Gregory: Or a lot crazy. Of course I know a fair amount of mathematics — how many SF writers have published in the *Journal of Mathematical Physics*? — and I did know that there are categories of infinite numbers, for example. Not all infinities are equal! Still, that's pretty arcane stuff. Readers might prefer to watch paint dry.

Kevin: Well, they seem to like the literary equivalent — but let's not knock the competition.

Gregory: Why not? Afraid of the unending-fantasy-series guys?

Kevin: No, envious. Actually, I meant mainstream writers.

Gregory: Oh, you mean Real Writers, concerned with The Human Condition.

Kevin: When I was taking college creative writing courses, my professors always seemed to content themselves with what I came to call "breakfast dishes stories" — stories in which a couple sat over their dirty breakfast dishes and had a dull conversation about how their relationship was breaking up. The End. That sort of thing always drove me nuts. I'm glad to see (and so are our readers, I hope) that your mind and mine both work on a grander scale.

Gregory: Well, I'm an astrophysicist, so it's an occupational prejudice. All the things we study are gonna live longer than we do!

Kevin: Ah, but not our immortal works.

Gregory: Except for the immoral ones, of course. Y'know, that title led me to eventually include in the book some of the newest ideas in cutting edge physics. Some theorists think we may live in a universe that has more dimensions, and we're sitting on a membrane in that — a "brane" that one could leave if we could figure out how to move in larger dimensions.

Now, I already planned to set the book a billion years from now. Be ambitious! I was worn out with hard-nosed near-future novels like *Eater* and *Cosm* and *The Martian Race*. The reason we see few far-future novels, I suspect, is that the changes would be vast, the resulting society

incomprehensible. That's why far future novels tend to be set in forests and non-technological societies. So I decided to tell the tale from the vantage of a young girl, living in a forest – then explode the story outward into the whole universe, in classic old fashioned SF style.

Kevin: I notice that Gary Wolfe in *Locus* said exactly that, and wishes you'd write more cutting edge stuff.

Gregory: Reviewers always want you to write what they like, of course.

Kevin: But we want to write what *we* like!

Gregory: Exactly. I felt in the mood for a fairly light-hearted romp through infinities.

Kevin: Seriously, you've already taken us practically to the end of time in your Galactic Center series, and now you're taking your readers to even more cosmic distances, into other universes...not even satisfied with infinity itself, but you've gone **beyond** infinity. Aren't you taking it a bit too far?

Gregory: I like to get out of town on the weekends, and this seemed like a natural extension of that.

Kevin: I understand that *Beyond Infinity* is inspired in part by some of the masterpieces of Arthur C. Clarke. Even knowing that you lack no self-confidence, did it intimidate you to be taking a page out of Arthur C. Clarke's book (or making a novel out of his novella, as it were?).

Gregory: Sure. This novel emerges from a novella, *Beyond the Fall of Night*, that I published in 1990, together with Arthur C. Clarke's *Against the Fall of Night*. That novella was a continuation of Clarke's, and I shaped it to fit the length (though not the style) of his original. It was fun, especially the give and take with Arthur. Still, afterward I felt that the result was unsatisfactory, but could not see how to fix it.

Kevin: So fifteen years later —

Gregory: This novel attempts to remedy that. Plainly the ideas needed more air to breathe. So I have expanded the novella to more than three times its original size, and retitled it. Trappings of Clarke's far future I have dropped or rearranged.

New ideas, principally those of extra dimensions in our universe, I have pick-pocketed from the latest theoretical physics.

Kevin: So it's a high-minded, far future yarn?

Gregory: Years ago a friend, David Hartwell, used the term "transcendental adventure," and I thought about what that might mean. This novel may be an example.

Kevin: Is it easier to stick closer to home – by a hundred thousand miles or so, when you write about Mars – or to run to the ends of time and space?

Gregory: Near future is easier. Everybody gets the offhand references. But for scope, you need big perspectives in time. This novel looks at how evolution might work out, for example. A bit over a billion years ago, there wasn't much beyond slime molds around; how about a billion years hence?

Kevin: What sort of things do you throw at the TV when you hear commentators complain about the uselessness of exploring Mars, or even of continuing the space program?

Gregory: I don't watch TV news coverage for that reason. It's a medium with a one-day perspective. Not the ones you want telling you about the future!

Kevin: So is this your definitive take on evolution?

Gregory: Once again I find that there are more ideas in the novel than I could do justice to. Perhaps I will eventually write a sequel, to explore the avenues opened by this larger version. The far future is a big place. This is a snapshot of where I think evolution and technology might take us. No doubt the reality will be far stranger.



