



# MASTERING COSMIC CHAOS

On the 20th anniversary of man's first landing on the moon, I visited the country home of a man who was writing stories of lunar explorations more than 50 years ago, firm in the boyish belief that such things could happen.

Today Brian Aldiss sits on his mountain of top science fiction awards like a human satellite dish, picking up every flash of international news and knowledge he can get his hands on; extrapolating the facts into mind-blowing fictional transmissions.

But why science fiction?

"I was always, always into science fiction. Even as a small boy, grown-ups seemed to me so unaware of the fascinating world around them. I began to think, 'There's more to life than people see.' I had and still have such faith in possibilities.

"It's all about cause and effect. I'm so restless, I want to know 'What if...?' There's so much out there we don't understand."

Brian's first published novel was not a work of science fiction but a social comedy based upon a series he wrote for *The Bookseller* magazine whilst working as a bookseller himself.

"It couldn't have been a better start. Who reads *The Bookseller*? All the major publishers and agents in the country. Faber & Faber contacted me and asked whether I'd be prepared to put the series into book form.

"Would I be prepared to? My God I hadn't gone to them — they'd come to me!"

At this stage Brian had already written a 'practice novel'.

"It was 80,000 words. It took me two years and when I finally finished it I was ecstatic. I had written a novel. It was an awful novel, and I never considered submitting it anywhere. I knew it was

**Eminent science fiction  
writer Brian Aldiss  
talks to Kay Parris  
about putting visions  
into words**

awful. But now I knew I could write novels, and that I could write them better than this."

*The Brightfount Diaries* were duly written for Faber and published (1955). Then came Brian's first full length science fiction novel. He had sent off a short story that particularly pleased him to a science fiction magazine. The

editor's reply came back that yes, he was prepared to use the story, but he felt the idea was so good, it should really be made into a novel.

*Non-Stop* (Faber 1958) was the result and even today Brian considers it contains one of his best ever plots. The success of the novel gave him the confidence to leave his job and set up as an independent writer.

With £200 saved — and worth rather more in the 50s than now — Brian gave himself a year to "make good". Selling short stories to subsidise himself along the way, he gradually began to establish a reputation. His views on starting out will surprise those readers who cannot imagine life beyond that impossible first published novel.

"It's actually quite easy to become a writer, whatever your readers may think. It's easy to start. It is much harder to continue. I've known many writers who after four or five novels have dried up. They have nothing more to say, they can only repeat some stale formula.

"They hate their typewriter. It brings them face to face with themselves and they find there's nothing there. It's painful. Mary Shelley said, 'You cannot create out of a void.' There has to be something there. The creative impulse is to put order into a chaos that already exists.

"If you haven't got chaos in your mind, forget it. Be an accountant."

Attempting to investigate the Aldiss brand of chaos I began to pry into his sources of inspiration. They turned out to be packed with what Brian calls his "world consciousness".

"I read of all kinds of things that are going on in the world — political, scientific, whatever. And I seize on those that ring some internal bell.

"It might be about over population let's say. For instance in Cairo at the

moment they're involved in a vastly expensive engineering programme, largely funded by multi-national contractors, who will make a huge profit from the whole thing. Meanwhile the population's going up by a million souls every 10 months and 96% of the country is uninhabitable. They're breeding themselves out of existence. But there's no programme to do anything about that.

"Now a story like this awakes my moral indignation and my human concern. I can project those feelings into an imagined future world where a similar villainous idiocy is taking place."

Brian has more than a keen interest in current affairs. They obsess him. And I was wrong to imagine that even his confessed trances and day dreams are voyages into some world of pure fantasy.

"Oh yes," he teased. "There's a great big coin and one side is labelled 'The World', the other side is labelled 'The Psyche'. Really the two things are indivisible — the world you see, the world you can't see.

"The fact is we're not well aware of our thought processes — how we think. People are interested in writing, and other creative ventures, because it keeps them in contact with their deeper selves and we are so in need of that. Industrial culture has very much severed this contact — it's harder than ever for us to understand ourselves.

"The terrifying result is that mankind clings to all kinds of other gods — take ideologies for instance. Communism is collapsing everywhere because it was not practical in real terms; it was an idea in the head. If you can express that, I think you're writing about a hugely important issue."

Thus privileged with a glimpse of this writer's mental chaos — and apparently Brian was feeling particularly mad that day — I was ready to hear how he imposed order upon it for the sake of fiction.

"The way to deal with a novel is not just to start writing it, but to do what is known as a 'step outline'. Write the thing in paragraphs and scenes — what happens from beginning to end. At this stage you don't put in any dialogue.

"Now if your step outline only fills 20 pages then you haven't got enough for a novel and you need to rethink. Start rewriting the step outline and thinking intensely about what's in there. You'll find the concept will grow and expand.

"To begin the whole thing you need one incident from which the rest will follow. In Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, the chap wakes up and finds he's blind, and he thinks it's Sunday. Why? Because the world is silent. That's a riveting scene to begin with. Everything follows. And so it is with many of the best novels. You need something that will immediately help the reader to conspire with you.

"This is why people read thrillers, but it's the same with general novels. You must have a problem to resolve and

dynamic scenes at intervals throughout the novel.

"When you've got the plot sorted out, you then fit in the characters to see how they work with each other. They must be a whole 'family' of dynamic, contrasting characters. If 'father' is serious, heavy and religious then 'uncle' should be funny to counter-balance him. Two similar characters are too many. All these things seem obvious when you're reading someone else's novel but not when you're writing your own.

"Once your story is full of colour, excitement, romance and revelation, you can follow it through scene by scene, adding smells, sights, sounds and dialogue."

Aldiss' *Helliconia* trilogy (Gollancz 1982, '83, '85) is widely considered to be his masterpiece. This mighty epic depicts the evolution of a planet where each season lasts for centuries. Its imaginative scope is breathtaking and yet nearly every planetary feature is rooted in facts of cosmology.

Brian knows a great deal about planetary physics, "and knowing all about it entails being aware of what you don't know. Before I wrote a word of *Helliconia* I spent a year consulting experts on what the possible history, cosmology etc of such a place might be."

Reflecting upon the beginnings of *Helliconia*, Brian recalled: "For years I'd been haunted by the idea that it's really freaky how we live on a planet where the year happens to be 365 days long. 365 days! What kind of a number is that? Just supposing we lived on a planet where the year was 5,000 times as long. Then if you were born in the Spring it would be Springtime throughout your own and your children's lifetime. If you were born in the Winter — bad luck. It would *always* be Winter!"

The actual story of *Helliconia* developed from a general fiction novel called *Life in the West* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1980). This contemporary work, hailed by Anthony Burgess as one of the best 99 novels written since 1945, had come to Brian in a surge of inspiration:

"I was staying in Palermo, Italy, for a conference. On the last morning I strolled from the hotel to the quayside and looked out at the Mediterranean. Ships were setting sail into the distance. It was a peaceful scene, and it occurred to me that I'd got a whole novel in my head. It's happened to me before, but this time I determined to get back to Oxford, drop everything and write it down before it got lost.

"Well, *Life in the West* turned out to be large, buoyant, and extrovert. But I was aware that it had certain faults. So I decided to do something similar, but in the science fiction mode. This is how *Helliconia* began. Soon it outgrew the initial idea."

Readers of *Helliconia*, whilst swept into its cosmic scale, become involved with human sized characters. As Brian never tires of reminding those who are shocked by life in his imaginary world,

"Nothing happens in *Helliconia* that doesn't happen here."

*Helliconia* grapples with the idea that "We must accept a lack of perfection in the scheme of things"; must accept the duality of human nature.

The science fiction medium encourages readers to contemplate universal issues — providing possibilities that seem abstract in every day terms with a scenario.

"The science fiction writer has to tell you something astonishing so that you think 'My God I can't believe it'. Science fiction has to justify itself in a way that fantasy doesn't. Fantasy writers can just bring on a dragon and say 'Here's a dragon'. They don't have to explain how it evolved, what it eats or whatever. I think there has to be a central truth in a science fiction novel."

Acknowledged as a leading authority on science fiction, Brian is not impressed with the current state of the genre.

"I have a quarrel with science fiction at the moment. I think it's too commercial. And the trend is away from true science fiction into fantasy. The problem is that it's very much harder to dramatize current scientific developments than it was the simple mechanistic developments of a few years back.

"Suppose you want to deal 'truthfully' with a planet that has some form of alien life equivalent to human life. Forty years ago you could have used Mars, but now that there has been a mechanical landing on the planet, and we have not found any life in the top soil, a novel cannot credibly be set there.

"So where do you go? It's no longer feasible to have an alien race on any of the moons of Jupiter. To get beyond the limitations imposed by human discovery, you need to go as far as another solar system, and, consequently, you're talking light years away.

"But readers are only really interested in the here and now. You're in dangerous waters if you get too far ahead. The future is only a concept in the mind; a mirror with which we regard ourselves in the present. We want to know how *we're* behaving — we with all our destructive urges, not life forms in the 325th century."

This difficulty has led to a decline in science fiction writing and hence to a gap in the market. Brian urges new talent to strive to fill it. He's all for throwing in your job and giving yourself a real chance to write. What after all, he argues, are a few years' poverty?

"I look back on the days I was broke with something approaching nostalgia. And in many ways life was easier then; there was less pressure. Whenever I received a cheque, however small, I would rejoice. Nowadays I'm much less grateful. The cheque has to have four figures before I'm excited."

But Brian Aldiss is a writer in love with his profession. "It's a lion's life!" he roars.

And he is certainly a king in his jungle.