

Ted Chiang Interview

By Rani Graff

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[Stories of Your Life and Others](#)

Ted Chiang

Where does your writing start? What or who are your sources of inspiration?

You mean, where do I get my ideas? I don't know; I just write about what I'm interested in. Annie Dillard once wrote, "Why do you never find anything written about that idiosyncratic thought you advert to, about your fascination with something no one else understands? Because it is up to you. There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain. It is hard to explain because you have never read it on any page; there you begin. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment."

You are regarded by many as a new and unique voice in contemporary SF. Who, among other contemporary SF or Fantasy writers, do you consider to be a unique and interesting voice?

The SF/F field is full of writers with distinctive voices. Some of my favorites are Greg Egan, Karen Joy Fowler, John Crowley, Gene Wolfe, and Ken MacLeod.

What SF or Fantasy writings (books, stories or novelettes -- contemporary or classic) made it to your all time personal favorites short list? What non-SF writings made it to that list?

I don't really have an "all-time personal favorites" list, so I'll just mention some books that I've read recently. In the SF/F genre, I enjoyed China Miéville's **The Scar**, a wonderful depiction of a world filled to the brim with wonders. Outside of SF/F, I enjoyed Alice Sebold's **The Lovely Bones**; there's been a bit of a backlash against it because of its overwhelming success, but I found it genuinely moving.

What was the effect Clarion had on your writing? Can you tell us about the Clarion experience?

For me, Clarion encouraged me to keep on writing. Before I was accepted to the workshop, I hadn't received any encouragement about my writing, and I was on the verge of giving up. Clarion was the first time anyone told me they liked my work. Clarion also introduced me to the SF community. Before I attended, I hadn't known anyone who read SF, let alone wanted to write it, so meeting my fellow students there was like discovering a family I'd never known I'd had.

When reading your stories, especially "Seventy Two Letters", "Tower of Babylon", and "Hell is the Absence of God", one gets a distinct cynical notion towards organized religion and God. What is your attitude towards religions? And if I may: What is your attitude towards God, or the notion of God? Do you yourself believe in God?

I wasn't raised in any religion, so I don't have such strong feelings toward religion that many people do. When I was younger I had a vague belief in God, but as I grew older, it seemed to me that the idea of God didn't explain anything that couldn't be explained otherwise, so I'm currently an atheist. I think

religion is interesting, but my interest in it is strictly abstract. I recently had a conversation with someone who said she had occasionally experienced epiphanies, moments when she felt the presence of the divine. I have never experienced anything like that, which probably keeps my interest in religion from becoming more than abstract.

In "Seventy Two Letters" you are using some cabalistic elements and Hebrew words. What is your connection to Cabala and Hebrew?

I have no background in either. In preparation for writing the story I did some research in the Golem myth, and of course that involves Kabbalah/Cabala and Hebrew. Before that I didn't know much about either subject.

How did you come up with the idea for "Seventy Two Letters"? What made you combine the Golem idea and the preformation theory into one story?

As I describe in the story notes in the collection, I realized that both of these ideas have relevance to the notion of self-replication. The process by which one organism gives rise to another is one that we don't fully understand even today; the complexities involved are truly astonishing. I'm interested in how people in the past tried to understand the phenomenon, and I can see how both the golem and the theory of preformation reflect people's thoughts about the concept.

Seems to me that the main character in "Story Of Your Life" is a tragic one. She can see the course of her life before it actually occurred, and probably knows how and when it will end, all the result of her learning the alien language. This is a very heavy burden for a person to carry. Do you feel that ordinary people like us would be able to carry such a burden? Would you have learnt that language yourself if you had a choice?

In a sense, ordinary people already carry such a burden, because we all know we're going to die. We can also expect to experience many losses before we die, and -- with luck -- happiness too. The ability to anticipate the future is part of what it is to be human, I think; how many of us would be willing to give that up?

I don't see "Story of Your Life" as being purely a tragedy. Living life is about accepting the bad with the good. Sometimes that's a hard thing to do, but the alternative seems far worse.

One of the very distinct elements of "Hell is the Absence of God" is the total lack of dialog. What made you write it that way?

Partly it was an attempt to try something new as a writer. Nowadays a lot of SF is written using either first-person narration, or third-person limited narration, which is almost the same except for changing some pronouns. I wanted to try something different, and for a short story about three different characters, having a separate "storyteller" do the narration seemed appropriate.

"Hell is the Absence of God" is set in an alternate universe where the meaning of faith seems to be a bit different than the meaning it has in our universe. Care to elaborate on this?

I wanted to explore the idea of a universe in which religion doesn't require faith. In our world, religion relies on faith because definitive proof is unavailable. As a result, some people choose their religion based on which one makes them feel better, e.g. "I don't like the judgemental god of Religion A, so I'm going to worship the kind and gentle god of Religion B." That option exists because neither deity is unambiguously present, but if a particular god were here right now, we'd have to deal with him whether we liked him or not.

Of course, not everyone opts for the most comforting religion. Many people follow religions that sometimes make them feel terrible about themselves. There are probably many reasons for this, but I think one reason is that such religions describe a universe in which there is clarity, and many people find that clarity more valuable than sweeping reassurances. And I think the same situation would exist even after the appearance of a deity: no matter what action a god took, people would have widely differing interpretations of that action.

"Liking What You See: A Documentary" seems to be sending a somewhat poisoned arrow towards the western notion of external human beauty, but at the same time sends another arrow towards some extreme PC trends that seems to take place in America. Where do you stand in all that?

There will always be people who take things to extremes, but there are also good arguments to be made on every side. To me the essential problem is that it's hard to reconcile our reaction to beauty, which is deeply ingrained, with our desire for to reward merit rather than appearance. A feminist writer once said, "Allowing beautiful women their beauty may turn out to be one of the most difficult aspects of personal liberation." I thought that was a very good point.

You withdrew "Liking What You See: A Documentary" from the Hugo nomination. Why?

The story that was published isn't the story I wanted it to be. When my editor and I originally set a deadline for a new story for the collection, he told me to make up a date, and he'd give me an extension if I wanted one. I made up a date; later, I told him I needed an extension. He refused. So I was forced to turn in a story I wasn't happy with.

This doesn't mean that I'm ashamed of "Liking What You See"; I'm not. And as with many writers, I can look back on any of my stories and imagine how it could have been done better. But with those other stories, at least I know that, at the time I submitted them for publication, I had done the best I could. That's not the case with "Liking What You See." I had a different story in mind, one which I think would have been better. And I didn't think it'd be appropriate for me to accept a nomination for a story that I wanted to do differently.

What is your notion of Human evolution, and where do you think it will lead us? Where would you like it to go?

Culture has been shaping human evolution for a long time; the classic example is how the spread of slash-and-burn agriculture led to an increase in malaria-bearing mosquitoes, which led to an increased occurrence of the sickle-cell gene which imparts partial resistance to malaria. What this example illustrates is that our effect on human evolution won't necessarily reflect our intentions; no one expected agricultural technique to have an effect on the prevalence of sickle-cell anemia. I think that, no matter what anyone tries to do with genetic engineering, the ultimate effect of our actions on human evolution will only be apparent in retrospect.

As for where I would like it to go, I think an important thing to remember about evolution is that it doesn't optimize individual happiness. Evolution is concerned only with reproductive success, and you can have a lot of children without being happy. So I don't want the human genome to move in any specific direction. I just hope that a better understanding of our evolutionary history, and how genetics affects human behavior, will help us create a social environment that lets us be happier.

You seem to create unique worlds in every new story that you write, fully detailed and everything. Were you ever tempted to write a story that is set in a world already created in one of your previous works?

I have sometimes thought about further exploring the universe of "Seventy-Two Letters," but so far I haven't come up with a story idea that satisfies me.

Looking back at all your stories to date, do you find any common themes?

I don't know of a single common theme that runs through all my stories, but perhaps what I most often wind up exploring is the relationship between the world as it is and the world as we perceive it to be. To understand the world we have to rely on the data provided by our senses and the concepts generated by our reasoning; you could say that my stories are attempts to examine the strengths and limitations of those resources.

Will we ever read a novel written by you?

Maybe, if I ever get an idea for one, but if I don't, I won't mind. I have no aspirations of ever making a living writing fiction, so I'm content to just write a short story once in a while.

Tell me something we don't know about Ted Chiang.

I'm left-handed.

This interview appeared for the first time in Hebrew at the [Bli-Panika](#) website.

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