



The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL PARKS.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

California: The Planet of the Future

The *Boom* Interview

Kim Stanley Robinson is one of California's best-known and well-loved, living science fiction writers. A prolific writer, author of two trilogies and several other novels, he is one of the few science fiction novelists who still dares envision utopia—not the static and socially constrained utopias of Thomas More or Edward Bellamy, but dynamic, complex, multicultural societies that always have to struggle for and reflect on their own futures. Robinson earned a Ph.D. from UC San Diego, where he worked with the legendary postmodern literary scholar Fredric Jameson and wrote his dissertation on science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. He cares deeply about California and is actively involved with the Sierra Nevada Research Institute at UC Merced

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and the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination at UC San Diego. Robinson is also a generous conversationalist. When not holed up at home in Davis, California, working on his next book, he can often be found out in the world these days talking about climate change and political change, and thinking out loud with scientists, activists, writers, and readers about the future. We spent a leisurely afternoon conversing with him at his garden writing table in Davis.

Boom: You write about other states, other countries, and other planets. Yet, you clearly identify yourself as a California writer. Why?

Robinson: I come from California. I grew up in an agricultural community: Orange County when there were orange groves. I lived in one of the first suburban intrusions into the orange groves. So right out my back yard, I could see nothing but orange trees. I loved to read, and my favorite book was *Huckleberry Finn*. I thought I could be Huckleberry Finn, and there was no evidence in front of my eyes that showed me things were any different from Missouri in the 1830s. I dressed as Huckleberry Finn, in cutoff blue jeans and a straw hat. I made my friends be Tom Sawyer and the other characters. But then in my teenage years, Orange County was transformed really rapidly. I read somewhere that five acres a day of orange groves were pulled out and turned into suburbia, every day for ten years. And so by the time I went off to college at UC San Diego, it was a completely different landscape. At that same time I started



An orange tree is pulled up in Orange County.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ORANGE COUNTY ARCHIVES.

reading science fiction. New wave science fiction was what I dove into. Modernism was being expressed in science fiction, and it was extremely exciting. And it struck me that it was an accurate literature, that it was what my life felt like; so I thought science fiction was the literature of California. I still think California is a science fictional place. The desert has been terraformed. The whole water system is unnatural and artificial. This place shouldn't look like it looks, so it all comes together for me. I'm a science fiction person, and I'm a Californian.

Boom: Is there a special brand of California science fiction?

Robinson: I think so. It began with people like Jack London and Upton Sinclair, and then the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society in the 1940s. This included Ray Bradbury, who moved with his parents to Los Angeles when he was young, like I did, both of us from Waukegan, Illinois, but him maybe twenty years earlier. Bradbury was always focused on what modernization was doing to human beings, to the nontechnological aspects of humanity. There was also Robert Heinlein, who was living in Los Angeles in the forties. Crazy Bob they called him when he was young. He was always a strange amalgam. And then there was Philip K. Dick in northern California, also Poul Anderson and Jack Vance, Frank Herbert, and in her childhood, Ursula Le Guin. It turns out that many of the most interesting science fiction writers were in California. There's something strange and powerful about California, as a landscape and an idea, so the place may have inspired the literature.

Boom: Do you think that has to do with the national imaginary that associates California with the future?

Robinson: Yes, I think that's right. It's the westward motion. You see it in Robinson Jeffers: that world civilization just kept going west until it hit California, then it had to stop and figure things out. This is all a fairy tale, but it's powerful. It is an imaginary. And then also you've got Hollywood. You can think of California as the Marilyn Monroe of places, beautiful but fragile, seeming a little dim or spacey, but brilliant in odd ways, funny, and, you know, endangered. Everybody pays attention to it. It's too famous for its own good.

Boom: Your *Three Californias* trilogy lays out very different visions for California's future. Which of the three Californias would you want to live in?



Kim Stanley Robinson at home. PHOTOGRAPH BY URSULA K. HEISE.

Robinson: *Pacific Edge* without a doubt. *Pacific Edge* was my first attempt to think about what would it be like if we reconfigured the landscape, the infrastructure, the social systems of California. I think eventually that's where we'll end up. It may be a five hundred year project. I thought of it as my utopian novel. But the famous problem of utopian novels as a genre is that they are cut off from history. They always somehow get a fresh start. I thought the interesting game to play would be to try to graft my utopia onto history and presume that we could trace the line from our current moment to the moment in the book. I don't think I succeeded. I wish I had had the forethought to add about twenty pages of expository material on how they got to that society. Later I had a lot of dissatisfactions with *Pacific Edge*. You can't have this gap in the history where the old man says, well, we did it, but never explains how. But every time I tried to think of the details it was like—well, Ernest Callenbach wrote *Ecotopia*, and then explained how they got to it in *Ecotopia Emerging*. And there's not a single sentence in that

prequel that you can believe. So, *Pacific Edge* was my attempt, a first attempt, and I think it's still a nice vision of what Southern California could be. That coastal plain is so nice. From Santa Barbara to San Diego is the most gorgeous Mediterranean environment. And we've completely screwed it. To me now, it's kind of a nightmare. When I go down there it creeps me out. I hope to spend more of my life in San Diego, which is one of my favorite places. But I'll probably stick to west of the coast highway and stay on the beach as much as I can. I'll deal, but we can do so much better.

Boom: On the jacket of *Pacific Edge* it says you still love Orange County.

Robinson: Poor Orange County. Autopia, as I called it in *The Gold Coast*. The truth of the matter is I've spent hardly any time there since my parents moved away in 1991. I recently went to Newport Beach. Everything was the same, except the people. Instead of the people being all white, they were a mix of black and brown and white. That was beautiful



to see, it looked like a world place, cosmopolitan in a way it hadn't been. Do you love where you were when you were growing up? Well, yes—especially if you had good parents, a happy childhood, a beach. But I've found you can actually outlive nostalgia itself. I didn't know you could do that, but I have.

Boom: Is California two states or more?

Robinson: I've lived half my life in the south and half in the north. I like thinking California is one place. It's big. It's various. It's an entire country. It's an entire planet.

Boom: In *The Gold Coast*, your dystopian novel in the California trilogy, and in your other dystopian novels, are you issuing a warning about where we're headed?

Robinson: I am issuing a warning, yes. That's one thing science fiction does. There are two sides of that coin, utopian and dystopian. The dystopian side is, if we continue, we will end up at this bad destination and we won't like it. That's worth doing sometimes. But I won't do the apocalypse. That is not realist. It is more of a religious statement. I like disaster without apocalypse. *Gold Coast* is dystopian. And a lot of it has come true since it came out in 1988.

Boom: But, as you've said, all of California in some ways has been terraformed. It's not natural in the way we usually conceive of natural. Are we as gods, as Steward Brand famously proclaimed, so we better get good at it?

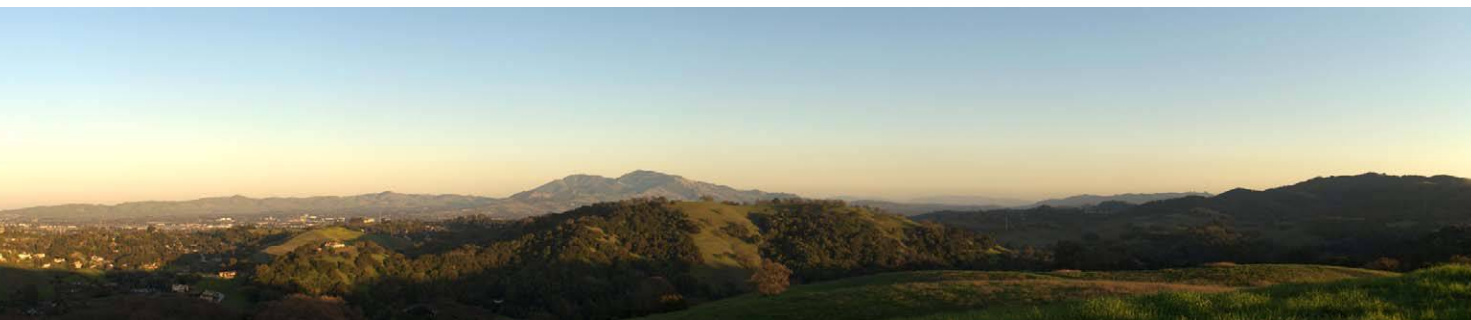
Robinson: California is a terraformed space. I think we have accidentally become terraformers, but of course we are not gods. We don't actually know enough about ecology, or even about bacteria, to do what we want to do here. We could make environmental changes that could do damage that we can't recover from, so it's dangerous. We're more like the

sorcerer's apprentice. We can do amazing things on this planet, out of hubris, and partial ignorance, and yet we are without the powers to jerk the system back to health if we wreck it. If ocean acidification occurs, we don't have a chance to shift that back. So we've accidentally cast ourselves into this role by our scientific successes, but we don't have the power to do what we need to do, so we need to negotiate our situation with the environment. The idea that we're living in the Anthropocene is correct. We are the biggest geological impact now; human beings are doing more to change the planet than any other force, from bedrock up to the top of the troposphere. Of course if you consider twenty million years and plate tectonics, we're never going to match that kind of movement. It's only in our own temporal scale that we look like lords of the Earth; when you consider a longer temporality, you suddenly realize we're more like ants on the back of an elephant. By no means do we have godlike powers on this planet. We have a biological system we can mess up, a thin wrap on the planet's surface, like cellophane wrapping a basketball. But there is so much we don't know. You can do cosmology with more certainty than ecology.

Boom: Speaking of terraformed, the Delta, where you live here in Davis, is a great example of a terraformed landscape.

Robinson: It's kind of great. It's troubled, but I think it's still beautiful. I like these human-slash-natural landscapes. I like terraformed landscapes. The Central Valley has been depopulated of its Serengeti's worth of wild creatures, and that's a disaster. But you could do amazing agriculture in the Central Valley and add wildlife corridors, where the two

California is a
terraformed space.



The view from Mount Wanda, John Muir National Historic Site. PHOTOGRAPH BY WAYNE HSIEH.

could coexist in a palimpsest, big agriculture and the Serengeti of North America, occupying the same space. And then it would be that much more interesting and beautiful. If you went out there to the edge of Davis now, you would see nothing in terms of animals. But if you went out there and it was filled with tule elk and all the rest of the animals and birds of the Central Valley biome, occasionally a bear would come down out of the hills; and, well, you couldn't run alone out there, because of the predators. You'd have to run in a group. But humans are meant to run in groups. The solo thing is dangerous. So it would all come back to a more natural social existence. This is the angle of utopianism that I've been following. It's a kind of natural-cultural amalgam, whereas utopian literature historically was mostly a social construct, and it was kind of urban. Utopia was thought of as a humanist space, but when you think of humans as part of a much larger set of life forms, then you get to a utopia that includes it all and is a process. I haven't actually written the novel that would put all of this together, because each of my novels has been a different part of the puzzle and a different attempt at it. So I keep having an idea for the book yet to come. Seems like I might start another one like that sometime soon.

Boom: If your utopia is not humanist, what is it?

Robinson: I don't think of myself as a humanist in the usual definition, but I'm definitely not a believer in deep ecology either. I don't like the Ludditeism and antihumanism of deep ecology. I call myself a shallow ecologist. We're completely part of the biosphere and networked with, and our health is dependent on it. But Gary Snyder among others has taught me that the nature-culture divide is a blurry, unnatural divide; we're interpolated with the planet. The more we learn, the more we realize we're "bubbles of

earth." But we're also its self-consciousness. We're its most articulate language speakers. We're the ones who can mess things up really badly. But I can't go with the part of the environmental movement that is antitechnological. We're so technological. I've been thinking about this and trying to look at it from a different angle. Can we find a balance, a way of doing things by the use of science and technology and political cleverness, that we could get to permaculture?

Boom: Permaculture?

Robinson: I prefer that term to sustainability. Sustainability is a captured word, and sustainable development is a captured phrase, a kind of greenwashing. Now it means, we can keep on doing capitalism and get away with it. Permaculture on the other hand implies permanence, but also permutation—some kind of dynamic stability or robustness, by making really long-term health the goal.

Boom: Even with climate change?

Robinson: California could maybe handle sea level rise better than a lot of other places. Its coastline is not a drowned coastline like the East Coast, so although the Delta would be in big trouble, most of the California coastline is steep enough to take a lot of the projected sea level rise—although the beaches will be in trouble. Right here we're about fifty feet above sea level. So the maximum sea level rise projected for the next couple centuries would remain a ways over there to the south.

Boom: So we can just adapt to climate change in California?

Robinson: No, that's not right either. We are in a moment where we have to change, or we'll get to a situation that is not even adaptable. Adaptation is a word like sustainability, because it suggests that we could cook the planet and it still



might be OK. That isn't true, and besides, we haven't cooked it yet. So it's time to act now and actually do mitigation. I've run into young environmental philosophers who say, "Be realistic, Stan. We're headed for a five-degree rise in temperature; we have to adapt." But this I think is a pseudo-realism. Think about mass extinction: how do you adapt to that? It would drive us down; we might not go extinct too, but we would suffer so badly. No. We need mitigation. We need to fight the political fight. We need a carbon tax; we need everything except giving up. To say we've lost the battle already is just another science fiction story. It's saying that we will lose. But beyond 2013, nothing has happened yet. Path dependency is not the same as inevitability. People are way too chicken when faced with the supposed massive entrenchment of capitalism. It's just a system of laws, and we change laws all the time.

Boom: Don't we need both mitigation and adaptation? Even if we could stop emissions altogether right now, it will get hotter. We will have to do significant adaptation.

Robinson: That's true to an extent. But it's a later moment where we shift to adaptation, as opposed to mitigation. We need to mitigate now. We know how to do that: we decarbonize power generation and transport systems. But we haven't put together a coherent political or ecological picture of what adaptation means. Right now it just means giving

up. It's saying economics trumps ecology. In biophysical terms, in terms of physical reality, that just isn't the case.

Boom: Climate science has become an important part of your work, in your writing, and outside of your writing.

Robinson: I think the scientific community is going through a revolutionary moment. They already raised their hands and said we have to pay attention to climate change. And yet we haven't changed very much. Now they have to take different strategies and renew the effort. I talk to them about this. I try to make them aware that they are already utopian actors by being scientists. And this notion that they have, that there has to be separation between what science does and what everything else does, is not quite true; it's not the full story. They need to start thinking of themselves as political actors.

Boom: Political? Utopian? But haven't science and business as usual also gone hand in hand?

Robinson: My story here is that from the very start science and capitalism were very tightly bound together, like conjoined twins, but were not at all the same, and indeed were even opposed systems of thinking and organization. They were born around the same time, yes; but if you regard them as identical, you're making a very bad mistake. Capitalism's effect on humanity is not at all what science's effect is on humanity. If you say science is nothing but instrumentality and



The view from Skylab Crater on Mars. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NASA.

capitalism's technical wing, then you're saying we're doomed. Those are the two most powerful social forces on the planet, and now it's come to a situation of science versus capitalism. It's a titanic battle. One is positive and the other negative. We need to do everything we can to create democratic, environmental, utopian science, because meanwhile there is this economic power structure that benefits the few, not very different from feudalism, while wrecking the biosphere. This is just a folk tale, of course, like a play with sock puppets, like Punch and Judy. But I think it describes the situation fairly well.

Boom: What about democracy?

Robinson: I think democracy is crucial, but it needs the power of science to prevail. Democracy can be bought. Capitalism can defeat democracy, unless there is democratic science and science for democracy. The big heavyweight that could actually defeat capitalism in this world is science. It's the method that copes with the natural world and makes both the necessities and the toys, and makes the food for the seven billion. Democracy can get whipped if it doesn't have this utopian practice of science backing it. Secularism, the rule of law—these are aspects of scientizing the social world. They are part and parcel with the scientific method. Once again, I'm just talking sock puppets, but this is the way I have been trying to explain it in my novels.

Boom: But one of the difficulties of science is that it's not accessible to people without very specialized knowledge. It's sometimes very difficult to see how you square science with democratic deliberation.

Robinson: Science is not esoteric compared to, say, law. Every scientific abstract is trying its best to be as clear and accessible as possible. Science as it was originally designed is supposed to work like this: I find something out about the world; I share it with you. You find out more; you share it with me. So in its pure state, it is an incredibly open and public procedure. You can't do that with legal documents, you can't do that with economics, and you can't do that with a lot of postmodern criticism. Science is much more open and transparent than a lot of the disciplines we have. It gets complex because reality is complex. But I'm still convinced that we must seize on science as a way out of this mess. It's a kind of quantified and experimental realism, or praxis.

Boom: You describe your science fiction as realist, but there are sometimes surrealist moments, like in *2312*, when a depauperate Earth is repopulated by wild animals that are bred off planet and dropped gently from the sky in bubbles.

Robinson: That moment is like a painting, maybe a Magritte. It struck me like an image out of a dream. It doesn't make sense in some ways, and yet it's what we are talking about

when we talk about rewilding. And I was thinking about habitat corridors, and how both humans and habitat could exist together, by the creation of corridors given to the animals, and so the image came from that, like a poem. When it did, I thought this is good. I don't care if it makes sense or not; it's so beautiful. So I wrote the scene. Novel writing is an irrational and emotional business. I'm mostly an analytical person, an English major, so it's possible for me to overthink things. But the image is crucial, the story is crucial. So if you're writing something that feels right, then skate fast over thin ice and fly with it! Then you can have your characters argue about it afterward, as people would if something like that were really to happen.

Boom: You spend a lot of time in the Sierra Nevada, but the mountains only make a brief appearance in your science fiction. Why is that?

Robinson: It's been hard to find science fiction stories that would include the Sierra, although I've tried. There is a sense in which my Mars is entirely a Sierra Nevada space. And the actual range itself shows up in *The Gold Coast* and *Pacific Edge* and in *Sixty Days and Counting*. But in the future, I want to write about the Sierra Nevada much more extensively and in more detail. I know what it's like up there, and I think it could be useful to share that knowledge. There's been too much writing about the mountains as a dangerous place, a place for risk taking. What I want to do is more welcoming, a writing that says come back to the Sierra, use it as a space to ramble and look around. It's not a place of death-defying stupidity, but actually a place to renew yourself, as a suburban or urban Californian especially. So, when I write about the Sierra Nevada directly, which I have not done yet at any length, I want to do it as nonfiction, some kind of not-yet-defined nature writing.

Boom: Is there a model for this kind of writing?

Robinson: Well, John Muir. Muir is good!

Boom: In Muir's writing nature is often personified. Are you interested in that model? Or do you have a different idea of nature's agency?

Robinson: I've read all of Muir now and studied his life. I would say he does not personify nature so much as worship it. His attitude is devotional, but he usually doesn't define it as a totality; he speaks of particulars. One thing I've noticed

about Muir is that his best writing is not his most famous writing. His best Sierra writing is in his early journals, and his first scientific articles, which were published in the *New York Tribune* and made him famous. These are awkward but quite beautiful articles. In them he is writing about why the landscape looks like it does. The Ice Age itself was a new idea at the time he wrote, and he was the one who applied Agassiz's glacial theory to the sculpting of the Sierra. So this is his great writing, which is both scientific and devotional at the same time. Later, when he became a political figurehead and wrote *The Mountains of California* and his other famous books, those are like Victorian magazine articles. They are bland. They are not his best writing. So his reputation as a writer has suffered. But then at the very end of his life, E.H. Harriman hired a secretary to follow him around so that Muir could dictate his memoirs to him, and that again is great: *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*. So we have great writing, then mediocre writing, and then really great talking.

Boom: You have two sons. If science fiction was your literature growing up, what is their literature?

Robinson: They and their friends seem to have an intense interest in fantasy literature as a kind of escape from their historical situation. They're a little bit symptomatic. Young people of my generation liked science fiction because the future was going to be better. There seemed to be real opportunity. The world was your oyster, and the future was going to be amazing. That was quite powerful. Now, when you see what new science fiction has become for the young—it's *The Hunger Games*, it's dystopia—that's a very powerful image of how they feel right now. They feel this: we've been pitted against each other, big forces are in control of our lives, and we're going to be fighting for scraps. We're going to be hungry. That is another dream, a surrealistic dream about capitalism, of how it feels to the young and how they're responding. And then with *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, that's wish fulfillment, where you get back out in the forest and ride on horses. It's already interesting to imagine that, in the middle of their suburban lives looking at screens. Also, the good guys and the bad guys are easily distinguishable, and there are organized forces to fight the bad guys, who are an other and not you. It's very simplistic. But these stories we love when we are young are always allegories of our wishes and dreams. So it's very interesting. My own contribution, then, would be to keep



The Sierra Nevada from Manzanar, California. PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN PERCY.

on presenting an image of the future that is positive and achievable, and doesn't take place five million years from now, or five million light years away, but is just Earth and the solar system in our own near future—something that people think might happen, a kind of realism. And I get my readers, and I see that many of them are young, although not all. Because I think people do continue to crave utopia.

Boom: Do you think there is something special California can contribute to this utopian project?

Robinson: I do. I think we're a working utopian project in progress, between the landscape and the fact that California has an international culture, with all our many languages. It's got the UC system and the Cal State system, the whole master plan, all the colleges together, and Silicon Valley, and Hollywood. It's some kind of miraculous conjunction. But conjunctions don't last for long. And history may pass us by eventually, but for now it's a miraculous conjunction of all of these forces. So I love California. Often when I go abroad and I'm asked where I'm from, I say California rather than America. California is an integral space that I admire. And we're doing amazing things politically. I like the way the

state is trending more left than the rest of America. And San Francisco is the great city of the world. I love San Francisco. I think of myself as living in its provinces—and provincials, of course, are often the ones who are proudest of the capital. And many of my San Francisco friends exhibit a civic pride that is intense, and I think justified. So there's something going on here in California. I do think it's somewhat accidental; so to an extent, it's pride in an accident, or maybe you could say in a collective, in our particular history. So there's no one thing or one person or group that can say, ah, we did it! It just kind of happened to us, in that several generations kept bashing away, and here we are. But when you have that feeling and it goes on, and continues to win elections and create environmental regulations, the clean air, the clean water, saving the Sierra, saving the coast: it's all kind of beautiful. Maybe the state itself is doing it. Maybe this landscape itself is doing it. **B**

Note

This interview was conducted by Jon Christensen, Jan Goggans, and Ursula K. Heise, and edited by Jon Christensen and Kim Stanley Robinson.