

## Equal Time for Freethought

Interview with David Gerrold by Barry F. Seidman, August 7, 2005

Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

**Barry F. Seidman:** Today we're gonna do something a little different. We're gonna be speaking with science fiction author David Gerrold on *Star Trek*, science fiction, and secular humanism. Perhaps more than any other kind of genre fiction, science fiction has been the one most connected to the naturalistic worldview and humanism since the nineteenth century. Rutgers professor H. Bruce Franklin, historian and author as well, has written about nineteenth century science fiction and post-World War II sci-fi, as one of the most radical forms of literature the West had ever produced. And Isaac Asimov once said of his own genre, "Individual science fiction stories may seem as trivial as ever to the blinder critics and philosophers of today, but the core of science fiction, its essence, has become crucial to our salvation, if we are to be saved at all."

David Gerrold started writing professionally in 1967. His first sale was "The Trouble With Tribbles", an episode of the original *Star Trek* television series. Within five years, he had published seven novels, two books about television production, three anthologies, and a short story collection. He was nominated for the Hugo and Nebula awards six times in four years. Since 1967, he has published more than forty books, including [\*The Man Who Folded Himself\*](#), [\*When H.A.R.L.I.E. Was One\*](#), and the four books in the War Against the Chtorr series. David Gerrold has had columns in six different magazines, and two websites, including [Starlog](#), [Profiles](#), and [Galaxy Online](#). In 1995, he won the Hugo and Nebula for [\*The Martian Child\*](#), an autobiographical tale of his son's adoption.

Welcome, David Gerrold, to Equal Time for Freethought!

**David Gerrold:** Hey, hello. Thank you.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Glad to have you. I've been trying to get you here for a while. First, the basics: who inspired you when you first began writing science fiction, and why?

**David Gerrold:** Yeah, good question. For me, it was Heinlein and H. G. Wells and a whole bunch of other guys: Arthur C. Clarke and Theodore Sturgeon, and a lot of the grand old men of the field.

**Barry F. Seidman:** What was it about science fiction, though, that made you decide that you wanted to do the same thing? What specifically? If there *is* anything specific.

**David Gerrold:** I blame Heinlein for this. It's that Heinlein wrote his stories so believably that I was absolutely convinced he lived then, that there was this secret that people weren't being let in on that Heinlein was off traveling among the stars. If I could just get in on the secret, I could have some of these adventures too and travel among the stars. Of course, I think the great disillusionment of adolescence was discovering that it was only made-up stories. But by then, I was so hooked. Well, you know what, "I get it, the way it happened", get inside it in your head and make it up for yourself. It is as real as it can be. It almost becomes false memories for you, creating this "Oh, yeah, I've been there". You can create experiences as vivid in your memories as if you'd actually lived then.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Your own virtual reality.

**David Gerrold:** Without having to buy all that computer gear.

**Barry F. Seidman:** There you go.

From H. G. Wells to Isaac Asimov to Kim Robinson, science fiction authors have found a way to discuss usually very important, quite often controversial, and prophetic, if you will, statements about human societies and their achievements in ways writers in other genres might never get away with. Why do you think this is so?

**David Gerrold:** You're understating the case. Science fiction is the most subversive of all literary genres. You can get away with stuff in science fiction that you can't get away with anywhere else, because half the time, the people you are holding up to the light don't even realize that you're doing it. Jonathan Swift, for example. In *Gulliver's Travels*, that was the great charming kid's fantasy, right? Nah-ah. Great satire of the world he lived in. *Alice in Wonderland* contains some scathing satires of people in English life at the time that Dodgson was writing it. So clearly, we're talking about a literature that has always been willing to challenge. And I think even if science fiction never did anything more than say, "Well, we can go to the moon", that would still be subversive. Because the underlying statement in science fiction is: "The way things are is not the way they have to be; we can change things." That's a very subversive statement. We can change things.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. And certainly your science fiction has been very much about these kinds of ideas. You've written this kind of progressive humanistic writing, from your early affiliation with Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* and throughout your novels. First, how do you rate *Star Trek* overall, since that's what you became famous for, at least at first. In terms of humanism, particularly concerning its vision of the future, do you think it's on track with its optimistic vision of the future?

**David Gerrold:** Good question.

**Barry F. Seidman:** I know there's a big difference between the original series and what's come since.

**David Gerrold:** Well, if you're asking me about *Star Trek* then I have to say that in one regard, *Star Trek* is the McDonald's of science fiction. You know, if you go in for a Big Mac, you know what you're gonna get: you're gonna get a Big Mac. The original series, when Gene L. Coon was running it for Roddenberry, was very subversive, because we did antiwar stories, we did stories about drugs, stories about the wisdom of going to war in Vietnam, our own arrogance as people, and so on. You look at episodes like "Balance of Terror" or "A Taste of Armageddon". A lot of the episodes in there were truly about who we are as a culture. But then there were also the episodes that Dorothy Fontana wrote, which were really good at looking at who are were as individuals, who are we as people.

Now, the reason why that was is that the original series was never a big hit. So there was always "Well, we're probably gonna get canceled tomorrow, so let's just do a good show on our own. Let's just make the best show we can for us." And so of course, there was that attitude of "we knew we were doing something very out of the ordinary", so we were just

trying to make good science fiction. When *Star Trek: The Next Generation* came along, Paramount knew it was a sure-fire hit, and so a lot of the people who came on board were saying, "We have to protect the franchise, we can't take chances". So, the big difference is that in the original series, we were playing to win, whereas with NextGen, they were playing not to lose, which is a whole different way of playing the game.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Personally, I think NextGen did a pretty decent job. I think where it started falling apart was by the time it got to *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, that obviously they were playing it not to lose, and lost anyway, in my opinion. But moving right along, in one of your early novels, *The Man Who Folded Himself*, you addressed a great many issues, with a relatively short novel about time travel. The book is about finding one's sense of self in a universe where the self is really just a construct of our brains.

**David Gerrold:** The book can be interpreted about fifty different ways. In one sense, it's a coming-out story, it's a story of taking personal responsibility, it's a story of: Who are we in this universe? Who are we as human beings? What does it mean to be a human being? What can an individual do when he gets a sense of how the universe works? I reread it last year, and the hero is a shallow little twit, and really not a very nice person at all. But at the end of the book, he says "I'm gonna put on the belt, I'm gonna take responsibility for who I am."

**Barry F. Seidman:** The belt being the time travel machine itself.

**David Gerrold:** In other words, he accepts responsibility for the power that he's taking on. He says, "All right, look, I have this power, I can either fool around or I can take responsibility." So he takes responsibility for his life, his place in the world. And that's really what the story is ultimately about, it's all on the last page. "OK, so this is what's up. I take responsibility." And as an individual, as human beings, I think that's all we ever can do, is take responsibility for ourselves, and our lives.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Well, as you mentioned, it's about a lot of things leading up to that last page. In this novel, you begin to contemplate, as you mentioned, sexual orientation — in very unique fashion — because there's really only kinda one real character in the book, so to speak. Can you explain how and why you added this dimension to *The Man Who Folded Himself*?

**David Gerrold:** Well, it was 1972 when I was writing it. It was like two years, three years after the Stonewall revolution. I was living in Manhattan, and the whole gay liberation/gay pride movement was happening. And so I was very conscious of it. And at the same time, the science fiction community, of which I was fairly active in going to conventions and things, the science fiction community has always been about ten years ahead of mainstream society. So you can always look to see what's acceptable in the science fiction community and you'll see where the mainstream is gonna be in about five years, ten years. And there were a lot of gay people in science fiction who were just candidly, openly gay; so what came along in writing the story was that the potential was there for the gay sex scene.

And it was 1972 and I had already broken ground in *When H.A.R.L.I.E. Was One*, in writing the story as a mainstream novel. So I had already written the first straight, clinically

detailed, accurate sex scene in a mainstream novel, so I was then looking at this thing. Where do I go next? And I realized the potential for the gay sex scene, and I realized, if I don't write it, everybody's gonna know I copped out. They're gonna recognize the potential was there, and somebody else is gonna write it, and he's gonna get the credit for being courageous. And I just got, "Hmmp! I'm not gonna allow that. I'm gonna be the courageous one." Because I had actually put the book aside for a while, because I just "See, I don't know if I can write that? Is it safe?" And on and on. Once I had that conversation with myself. Now wait a minute. Writers take chances. Writers get dangerous. And I think that was when I realized that the job of the writer is to write the most dangerous book possible. And I realized that was dangerous. At that time, 1972. It was published in February '73. At that time, I realized it was very dangerous and courageous to write a story in which a hero was not only gay, but unashamed about it; just took responsibility for it, said that "OK, so yeah! All right, this is part of my life, this is who I am", and then got on with his life.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Some years later, you've actually dealt with the situation being a gay man in the United States on your own and trying to adopt a child. I think you wrote what is probably, in my opinion, your most charming and intimate novel, *The Martian Child*, about this experience. Could you share that experience a bit with us, and perhaps how your son has changed your worldview?

**David Gerrold:** The thing about children that they don't tell you about ahead of time: There's two things that I think anybody considering adoption should be aware of, and the only two things that weren't in any of the books. The first is they turn into teenagers. There's no warning labels. They just turn into teenagers. One day you have this wonderful little person in your life. The next day you've got this person in your life who expects you to buy him a car. The other thing is related to that, is they're damned expensive.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Tell me about it.

**David Gerrold:** Would not recommend parenthood to anyone who isn't willing to go into debt about \$100,000 just to get the damned kid out of the house. Now, with that said: where I started with this particular adventure was essentially, I had been thinking, "Boy, it's a good idea, maybe I'd like to do this someday", and then one day I read about an adoption fair in the newspaper, and then I realized that the big difference between "someday" and right now, making it happen right now. And I realized I had to shift my thinking about who I am and what I'm taking on, and I said "OK". So it's about family building; it's about the adventure of being human; it's about making a difference in someone else's life; and it's about having someone you can go to Disneyland with. I really did a lot of soul searching. And that's one of the reasons why the adoption process takes up to a year, is to give yourself a chance to step into; you design a new you.

And you really need to spend time thinking, well what am I gonna do if the kid wets his bed? And that's when the question's asked: what are you gonna do if he wets his bed? Clean him up? Change the bedsheets? Reassure him that it's normal, it happens, and hug him and tuck him back in. What else are you supposed to do? The case worker looked at me like I was from Mars. "Well, you know, some people punish children for wetting the bed." I said, "Well, that's stupid." And he says, "Well, that's what we need to know, is if you're a nurturing person or if you're an authoritarian person." Where do you think our kids come from? Our kids come from damaged circumstances, and we wanna put them in places where

they're gonna get nurtured and supported and grow up to be good people. And so I got to look at that very, very intensely.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Has your worldview changed a great bit? Now that you've experienced this?

**David Gerrold:** Enormously. I knew that things were gonna change any time you introduce something new into your environment. Like when I brought a computer into my house, I knew it was gonna change the way I wrote. Bringing it into my house, I knew it was gonna have an effect on my outlook, on my attitudes on what I was writing, what I was writing about, and sure enough, it did. I'm not even sure how to quantify it, how to speak it. I think it made me more aware of how much we as human beings need each other, how much we relate to each other, how much we care about each other. And I think that ultimately is the biggest lesson we learn from our children. They're there to love us, we're there to love them. It's about this thing called family, and I'm not even sure I have the words for it. You have to experience it. It's kind of like the difference between talking about roller coasters and riding roller coasters.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Before we run out of time, I wanted to mention something else. We were talking about how humans think they are, about the human condition. In that other book you mentioned, speaking of computers, *When H.A.R.L.I.E. Was One*, it might've been one of the first books I read about artificial intelligence. While investigating what it might be like during our first contact with a sentient machine, you presented readers with a mirror image of themselves in H.A.R.L.I.E. What do you think makes us human? That is, what do you think is the essence of humanity?

**David Gerrold:** It is funny, I've been having a discussion with some friends about H.A.R.L.I.E., just this last year. And we were looking at this particular question: What does it mean to be a human being? And it suddenly hit me, and I said, "Who's asking?" And they said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, only a human is gonna ask that question. Nobody else is gonna care." And only sentient beings worry about the nature of sentience. Or the other way to look at it is, lack of enlightenment is only a problem to the enlightened. In other words, what we're talking about here is, that consciousness, there's several steps of it. There's a rudimentary awareness, like my dog can be aware of somebody at the door and start barking. That's awareness. But consciousness is being aware of your ability to be aware. That is, being able to think about thinking. But I think real sentience goes to the next level, where you choose and take responsibility for your thinking.

And I know this sounds elitist and arrogant, but I worry that not enough of us on the planet are sentient yet, that a lot of us are vaguely conscious, we're unconscious half the time, but we're vaguely conscious that we know we think, but we're not conscious enough to take responsibility for our thinking. We can take responsibility for how we drive our cars, but what's going on inside our heads, we think that's real, we think it means something. All these little conversations I got into with somebody recently, and I said, please, don't ask me to listen to voices in your head. Do you think I don't have any voices of my own? The big insight for me is that we all have these conversations about how we think the universe works, and we think those conversations are real. They're not. They're just stuff we make up. The real secret is to shut up, stop listening to those conversations, and open your eyes and your ears and look and listen and see what's really going on.

**Barry F. Seidman:** I wanted to get into a couple of questions about the War Against the Chtorr series since it's my favorite, but since we don't have the time for that, let me just ask a kind of a general question about it. It's fair for me to say that I think, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, that in that series, you have a pessimistic look at humanity's future.

**David Gerrold:** Actually, I don't.

**Barry F. Seidman:** No? OK, well, I was gonna ask you that, because I was gonna ask you to compare it to [*Star Trek*].

**David Gerrold:** The circumstances are dreadful, but if you'll notice, the people don't quit. They don't give up. They're trying to figure out how to make the situation work for them. It's kind of like, if you look at the studies they've done of when they pull up the tapes from the black boxes of crashed airplanes, what they find is the pilot is fighting with the airplane all the way down to keep it from crashing. Even though he knows it's crashing, even though he knows he's going in, he's still looking all the way down for a way to save the airplane. And I think that's heroic, and that's what human beings are doing.

**Barry F. Seidman:** And that's the message of hope that, ultimately, you have written in that series.

**David Gerrold:** I'm enormously hopeful that human beings can find a way. Now I could be wrong, and human beings might just be another good idea that turned out not to work in the course of evolution. I mean, we might be the source of this geological age's population crash. We're in the middle of another great dying, we just don't recognize it. And we might be the cause of it. 65 million years from now, some other species might be saying, "Well, what killed the humans? What killed the mammals?" And they say, "Well, looks like they've bred themselves out of existence." On the other hand, I remain enormously hopeful that we're smart enough to stop killing ourselves before it's too late.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Well, I certainly hope so too. And unfortunately, it's too late to continue this conversation, because it's now three minutes left to the program. So thank you, David Gerrold, for being on the program. And we can get you back some other time, we can talk more about that series, which is a very fascinating series, and some other work that you're doing. Thank you, David.

**David Gerrold:** Thanks.