

A Conversation with Chris Beckett, author of *Dark Eden*



***Dark Eden* began as a short story. What attracted you to the “Adam and Eve in space” angle and a sunless planet as the setting?**

What draws me (and a lot of people, I think) to science fiction as a form is that it allows you to do big thought experiments. I’m interested in how societies grow and change, and what better way of exploring that than starting again with just two people and trying to imagine what would happen?

In some ways I’ve turned the biblical story on its head: here it is Eden to which a human community have been condemned because of a historical transgression, rather than Eden from which humanity is expelled. I was also interested in a notable plot hole in the biblical story: What happened in the third generation, when the only available sexual partners are siblings or parents? In *Dark Eden* I confront this, and try to show a society shaped, you might say scarred, by its incestuous origins.

As to the sunless world: I believe I first got the idea for this from the antique computer on which I wrote the short story called “The Circle of Stones” (back in 1992). It was so antique that it had green letters on a black screen, the opposite to writing on paper, where the background is light and the writing is dark. I’m fairly certain this was the origin of the image in my mind of a sunless forest filled with luminous trees. When I started thinking about it, it had so many possibilities. How would such a world function? How would its life evolve? How would time be measured? The sunlessness of Eden also underlines the sense of loss that the people of Eden feel. Generations on, they long for the world their ancestors came from, where the sky was filled with light.

You mention on your website that some of your stories draw on your background in social work. Was that the case for *Dark Eden*?

Dark Eden less so than some of my other stuff I think. I worked for many years in the field of child protection social work—I was the manager of a team of child and family social workers for ten years—and came across a good many unhappy, dysfunctional, and even incestuous families, so I’m sure this played a part in the development of the community in *Dark Eden*, descended from one man and one woman, and still calling itself Family.

How concerned are you about plausibility and scientific accuracy? Do you think the planet Eden could really exist?

I’m not a “hard” science fiction writer and I don’t do a lot of serious research into the science behind my books and stories. I just run with my own intuitions, and what seems to work from the point of view of the story.

That said, I want my worlds to feel plausible to the reader. It struck me as likely that there would be planets in space that were not attached to particular stars (and I’m pleased to say that science confirms my hunch: they do exist and are known as “rogue planets”). It seemed to be, too, that life could still evolve in the absence of a sun, provided that the planet still had a hot core. After all, even on earth there are life forms that are solely powered by geothermal heat (indeed entire geothermal ecosystems exist around deep ocean volcanic vents, far from the reach of the sun). There are also lakes underneath the ice in Antarctica, such as Lake Vostok, where the water is liquid because of the heat from below. I see life on Eden as having evolved in such places and then slowly transformed the world around it.

One way of maintaining some sense of plausibility in a book of this kind, I think, is not to overegg it. I tried to confine myself to life forms that I really could imagine evolving on a planet like Eden, rather than inventing the strangest creatures that I could think of.

One little problem—it was first pointed out to me by a schoolboy when I was giving a talk!—is the question of how the human population of Eden obtains vitamin D, which of course on Earth we mainly obtain by synthesizing it in our skins using sunlight. I decided that, on Eden, there were sufficient dietary sources of the vitamin, but perhaps I was allowing myself a bit of poetic license here. Indeed, I’m not sure how likely it is that all the nutrients that human beings require—not just vitamin D, but all the other vitamins and proteins—would be available in an alien diet. But then again, who knows? Perhaps for life to exist at all, it needs to have similar chemistry to our own?

Many make a distinction between “literary fiction” and “science fiction” as genres. What do you think are the limitations of drawing such a distinction?

“Literature” is difficult to define, but I guess we mean by it writing that is of enduring value, rather than merely a diversion, a way of passing the time. It’s complicated—everyone agrees Shakespeare is “literature,” but we wouldn’t have heard of him if Elizabethan playgoers hadn’t also found him diverting— but I think most of us can appreciate the distinction, even if we might disagree about what to put in either category.

What I object to is an assumption I sometimes encounter among people who regard themselves as literary that, because something is set in the future, or in space, or has robots in it, it must therefore be a mere diversion and cannot be literature. I’m not saying my writing is literature—that’s not for me to judge—but I certainly *aspire* to write literature, and I don’t think anyone should decide whether it is or isn’t simply by looking at the genre label it happens to carry. (After all, categorized in purely genre terms, *The Tempest* is fantasy, *War and Peace* is historical fiction, *Pride and Prejudice* is romantic comedy. . . .)

I see science fiction as a modern manifestation of the fantastical strand in storytelling, which goes back to epics like *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* and doubtless long before: it’s fantastical fiction for a world in which we no longer believe in magic. (Or perhaps for a world in which magic *actually exists*? We really can fly to the moon, we really can “put a girdle around the earth in forty minutes.” . . .) One could even argue that realist fiction—the kind of fiction that mimics everyday life—is itself a rather specialist genre that has only relatively recently become popular.

All fiction involves making stuff up in order to provide interesting challenges and to explore areas of experience that we might not otherwise encounter. Science fiction writers differ from writers of realist fiction in that we don’t just make up characters and situations, we make up worlds. I mentioned earlier that this creates huge opportunities for thought experiments. That’s another way of saying that it vastly increases the range of challenges and areas of experience that it allows us to explore. A realist writer makes up characters and situations to explore human relationships—and I do that too—but in *Dark Eden*, I’ve also made up an isolated society on an alien planet, so that I can also explore society itself.

Many people comment on the language in *Dark Eden*, which is slightly different from English. What was your reason for this decision, and why did you change the language in the way you did?

I felt I needed to acknowledge that after 160 years without any contact with Earth, the language of Eden would have changed. The Adam and Eve figures—Tommy and Gela—came respectively from Brooklyn, New York, and Peckham in South London, so the language would obviously still be English, but not exactly either American English or British English as we know them.

First of all the people of Eden would have given new names to things that did not exist on Earth, but at first they would tend to name them after familiar things. A spotted predator is called a “leopard,” for instance, but its resemblance to leopards on Earth is pretty tenuous.

Secondly, in the absence of days, nights, or years, they would have developed new ways of talking about time. They speak in terms of wakings and sleeps, and while they still have the concept of a “year,” it seems pretty arbitrary to them, and they often refer to “wombtimes” —the human gestation period— as a rough way of measuring longer times.

Thirdly, words that they had no use for would be forgotten. When they first encounter an ocean, for instance, after many landlocked generations, they no longer remember the words “ocean” or “sea” and have to coin a new name.

Fourthly, they have a different set of folk memories to refer to: garbled stories about Earth, traumatic events from the beginning of the human family on Eden. I was actually particularly interested in the relationship of Eden people to their past.

Finally, the first generation born on Eden would have lived in a family where there were no adults but Mom and Dad. Parents with young children tend to lapse into baby talk a bit, I’ve noticed, even when the children aren’t present, and I felt that this might result in a permanent change to the language, in the absence of a wider adult world to draw the language back to its more “adult” form: hence the duplicated adjectives (“big big” instead of “very big”) and the tendency to drop direct articles.

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