

Interview

The Quotidian Apocalypse and the Quixotic Cause: An Interview with Author Connie Willis¹

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ABSTRACT

The writer Connie Willis lives in Greeley, Colorado, home to the University of Northern Colorado (UNC). She is an alumna of UNC and has chosen to deposit her papers in its archives. A pre-eminent science fiction author, her clock- and calendar-defying tales of time travel have transported many fans and won numerous awards. Her stellar reputation in fandom and among librarians as a mentor, peer, and public intellectual is well-deserved and hard-earned. She gives generously of her time at conventions, conferences, and community events. We finally caught up with her in the latter days of Summer 2018, after the Locus Awards and the Westercon science fiction and fantasy convention, and interviewed her about her recent novella “I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land” (first appearing in *Asimov’s Science Fiction* in 2017 and later published by Subterranean Press in 2018). It concerns a disappearing Manhattan bookshop that may also be a harbor for endangered books. The story’s subject matter is of great relevance for archivists and librarians of the Anthropocene—as is the content of our conversation with Ms. Willis, which ranges from the insidious nature of censorship to the nobility of fighting for lost causes.

¹ Portions of this interview were edited for clarity.

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INTRODUCTION

As we approach the point-of-no-return in the Anthropocene's climate crisis, how should critically-thinking archivists and librarians respond? The accelerated countdown in our apocalyptic advent calendar, as periodically recalculated by scientists, indicates an increasingly dire situation. It seems we cannot change the system, so should we join the lemming-like rush over the precipice? Some of us protest—we rage against corrupt and ineffectual politicians, adding to the mud slung in that fetid swamp. Others among us hide, hoping to disappear unnoticed into the quicksand of denial. What is the appropriate professional response to this unprecedented era of unimaginable loss? What might we recommend to our library users?

We could turn to our obvious remedy, readers' advisory: let's prescribe the ideal book to read, to elucidate these present conditions! If we were to choose one book of science fact with regard to the Anthropocene, it might be Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction*. In it, she borrows a metaphor from *Star Trek* to describe the devastating effect of our Anthropocenic avarice for fossil fuels: "[we are] running geologic history in reverse at warp speed."² But perhaps our readers' advisory list should skew toward less obvious choices, such as works of science fiction. Speculative fiction stretches our collective imagination; in order to face facts and act accordingly, we must first conceive of the unimaginable loss toward which we hurtle. In the following interview, author Connie Willis guides us through this phase of the Anthropocene and holds up a mirror for us to view our destructive trajectory toward extinction.

Ms. Willis lives in Greeley, Colorado, home to the University of Northern Colorado. An alumna of the institution, in 2010 she chose to deposit her papers in its archives and special collections. Since Willis' first publication of a short story in 1970, she has grown into a consummate writer of not only short stories but novelettes, novellas, and novels. Willis is the most decorated science fiction writer ever, having garnered eight Nebula Awards, twelve Hugo Awards, thirteen Locus Awards, and is a member of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. In 2012 she was named SFWA Grand Master of Science Fiction, joining a small and prestigious group that includes Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Willis is perhaps most well-known for her time-travel novels about Oxford historians: *Fire Watch*, *Doomsday Book*, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, and two-volume *Blackout/All Clear*. She, however, has written on a wide variety of subjects, from near-death experiences to fads, aliens, and the Rockettes.

² Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

The demise of the book is not a new subject for Willis. Early in our conversation, she responded to a question about her extensive bibliographic research, waxing about grief and nostalgia for extinction of literature, popular culture, and domesticated species:

There are books passing out of the world every day. It is a form of the end of the world in slow motion, which is a theme I have dealt with in lots of ways. I wrote "The Last of the Winnebagos" about losing lots of things...drive-in movies and endangered species. In that story, dogs have disappeared, which is something we love but could lose.³

Ephemera and the everyday are the bread and butter of archivists, and also of novelists. Willis, like us, preserves the quotidian in order to savor the miracle of one day's existence. In the microcosm of the ephemeral and ordinary is the macrocosm of an infinite universe of grandeur: one artifact or one character represents both the singular day and an entire era; one person's soul represents humanity's collective condition. One dog in "The Last of the Winnebagos" signifies the loss of an irreplaceable source of unconditional love and an entire species. One performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* by a ragtag wartime cast (their venue an underground bomb shelter in World War II London)⁴ signifies the survivalist spirit of humankind. In many of her works, Willis bolsters readers' sagging spirits with the exemplary ingenuity of a salt-of-the earth, resourceful hero (or often a pair or team of problem solvers). In "I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land," Willis boosts savvy librarians and archivists, reminding us of our value: we classify and know where things are stored; we understand the infrastructure of knowledge and preserve last copies.

With her speculative fiction, Willis provides an accessible lens through which to view current crises. Willis has used her science fiction to explore a number of difficult issues, including sexual abuse (*All My Darling Daughters*)⁵ and ideas of personhood (*Samaritan*).⁶ She has repeatedly visited apocalyptic landscapes ranging from the ravages of the plague in medieval England to the loneliness of young girl and her dog in post-nuclear war America. In all of these stories, Willis focuses on the resolve and humanity of

³ Originally penned in 1988, "The Last of the Winnebagos" has an ingeniously layered title. It is a nesting doll of various extinctions of the Anthropocene: genocide of a tribe of native people, last of a line of gas-guzzling recreational vehicles, the extinction of domestic dogs through parvovirus, and the end of photojournalism. Connie Willis, "The Last of the Winnebagos," *Asimov's Science Fiction* (July 1988): 18-72.

⁴ Connie Willis, *Blackout* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 2010) & Connie Willis, *All Clear* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 2010).

⁵ Connie Willis, "All My Darling Daughters," in *Fire Watch* (New York: Ballantine, 1998).

⁶ Connie Willis, "Samaritan," in *Fire Watch* (New York: Ballantine, 1998).

the protagonists. How do they respond to the end of all things? These creative characters serve as steady role models and encouraging guides through the emotional morass of the Anthropocene and can move us out of paralysis and panicked fear. They motivate us, like the Anglophilic meme, to “carry on and keep calm” with compassion and critical reasoning. Connie Willis’ protagonists refuse to become mired in angst over the Anthropocene, though they do pass through grief. Her body of work features heroes and heroines with pluck. They are impassioned, quixotic fighters for the lost cause. Kivrin survives the Black Death in *Doomsday Book*; Ned and Verity in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* find the bishop’s bird stump; the girl gets the boy in *Crosstalk*. Willis’ characters are plucky, but they are not naïve. The author subtly slips hope into metanarrative by reminding us to keep it all in perspective. In a 2013 afterword to “The Last of the Winnebagos,” she discusses the tenacity of the concept of Armageddon:

The End of the World is back in fashion these days, what with the whole Mayan calendar thing, nuclear terrorists in the news, and the ever more dire threat of global warming, but what people forget is that it’s almost always ending.⁷

The author confesses that she is tempted to update her stories (especially the dates and technology) because speculative fiction often projects and predicts incorrectly, but she concludes that they should be left untouched: “so let them stand, reminders of the past we had and the future we thought was coming, and how ephemeral it all is.”⁸

In the following interview Willis stands like her speculative stories, unredacted and honest, and reveals herself to be an engaging, articulate, and opinionated conversationalist. Infusing the interchange with intellect, feeling, and passion, the master plotter cleverly circles round Armageddon but does not take the easy route. She follows a serpentine road less taken, not the obvious didactic path. With a controlled burn of passion and an intellect as assiduous as Agatha Christie, Willis banters with the interviewers. The interview topics are wide-ranging, as the scope of Willis’ scholarship and knowledge is encyclopedic: literature, popular culture, history, and all things British.

Willis effortlessly toggles between the micro and the macro, the personal and political, the nostalgic and the forward-thinking. She rails at dispassionate historians and naïve techno-geeks, praises dedicated archivists and librarians. Willis’ writing is as rambunctious as her repartee. Her romantic comedies are laugh-out-loud, and her fearlessly open-minded and rational explorations of extrasensory perception and life after death are scintillating. A superb storyteller, humanitarian, and one of the “smartest kids in the room,” she appreciates and applies her personal and professional awareness of history in an empathetic, impassioned, non-perfectionist manner. No stranger to loss,

⁷ Connie Willis, *The Best of Connie Willis: Award-Winning Stories*, New York: Del Rey, 2013): 428.

⁸ Willis, *The Best of Connie Willis: Award-Winning Stories*: 429.

Willis warns as she quotes Camus: “do not wait upon the day of judgment. It happens every day.”⁹ She tackles the tough topics like Black Death, terminal illness, genocidal tyrants. Renting of cloth and gnashing of teeth may be appropriate responses, but so are ingenuity, pluck, and pugilism. Fight the lost cause and against the dying of the light. Bemoan the warp-speed extinction of species. Resist, recommend good books, organize, and resiliently persist. Such is the quixotic cause before us. Life goes on. We all fear Armageddon and the reaper, but continue to seek Ozymandias and eternity. The Twin Towers still stand in our imagination and memory yet simultaneously our tears merge into the descending waters of the 9/11 memorial. We grieve the violence and extinction all around us and we still collect and catalog the ephemera and detritus. We must marvel at the gift of being alive here now in this Anthropocenic age. We can critically think about geologic time, but we feel in our guts in this moment great grief at the loss all around. The sand swirls round where snowpack once accreted. Evidence of the climate crisis and our eroded future threatens to cuff our ankles; we slog together in harness and acquiesce today, fighting the lost cause like a gang in chains. Tonight, we’ll read science fiction by candlelight, then snuff the flame and confess to our lover under the cover of darkness that we do not know it all, but that we now know what to do in the meantime: “Do not wait upon the Day of Judgment”: advise your readers accordingly. Save what you can for future generations and refuse to serve the mongers of fear.

INTERVIEW

Introduction to *I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land*

WH, KS, EJT: You describe the frustration of Jim’s [the male protagonist’s] disorientation so vividly. Have you ever gotten lost in New York City?

CW: Yes, absolutely, all the blocks look alike, trust me. You can always go to a corner and look at the signs and find your way backwards, get in a taxi, as Jim does eventually. The east-west blocks are really long and so it is really hard to find stuff (unless it’s Carnegie Hall) because there are no real landmarks; it is all pizza stores and Starbucks and delis and they all kind of look alike. I felt that was very believable in my story. You could get lost and not know where you were...

WH, KS, EJT: As a Westerner, are you more aware of your Western roots when you are visiting an eastern city such as Manhattan?

⁹ Willis, *The Best of Connie Willis: Award-Winning Stories*: 429.

CW: I've always been fascinated by the differences between the East and the West. When I was growing up of course I thought we were hicks out here and New York was this cosmopolitan center of the world. Then we lived back East in Connecticut and went to New York a number of times and I was amazed that the people were even more parochial than they are here. They don't ever go outside their own neighborhood—which is three blocks. In New York people will say, "Oh my god, we had this fabulous deli and it moved and I am just heartbroken." I [ask] "Where is it now?" (it's six blocks down), and they [say], "It's just awful, I'll miss it so." And [I'm thinking], couldn't you take a taxi six blocks or go down one subway stop or something? But they think totally in terms of neighborhoods that are really small and that's very different from back here. The best thing about New York is the population density, so if you have a reading, 6,000 people would come, and if you have a bookstore, you have enough people to keep it afloat. But it's not nearly as sophisticated as I thought it would be. Not that it has anything to do with this particular story except for the fact that he was not from New York and was very much an outsider.

On the Disappearance of Literature

WH, KS, EJT: Why was Jim's favorite book a Western?

CW: I just wanted to pick something that I thought would have been a kid's favorite book. If he'd been a woman, I would have picked *Little Women* or *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, or something like that. Courtney's [my husband's] favorite book when he was a kid was *Chip of the Flying U*, which, amazingly, was written by a woman at the time, in 1905. It was B.M. Bower, "Buzzy," was her nickname, and she wrote a whole bunch of Westerns. She lived on a ranch and wrote the whole *Chip of the Flying U* series; it was a huge favorite among boys. I wanted to pick something that I thought a kid would really be emotionally attached to—something that, if you saw it in an antique store, you would have this shock of recognition and your childhood would come flooding back.

WH, KS, EJT: We were intrigued, amused and sometimes overwhelmed by the numerous names of books and authors that were mentioned in this story, some real, some confabulated. Do you deliberately create puzzles for your readers like this?

CW: Yes, I did, and that was the reason the book took so long to write – it was several years in the making. (I made the mistake of reading the first part of it at a convention and then for years had to face the question, "When are you going to finish the story?") What held me up was all the research, finding names of books that no longer existed. It is one thing if it's famous, like T.E. Lawrence losing the original *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in Reading Railway Station, but, your average crummy *Hardy Girls Going to Canada* kind of book would have passed out of the world completely unnoticed. I started trying to find lists of lost books and found that they were all the same 12 books. Then I started a very

complex process of picking an author, say Elinor Glyn (who was very popular at the time), and getting a list of her books. I tried to find them online and discovered they were unavailable. I was able to come up with what I thought was a pretty safe list of books that had disappeared out of the world. Of course, you never know what the last copy of anything is or whether there is still a copy in your dad's basement. There are books passing out of the world every day. It is a form of the end of the world in slow motion, which is a theme I have dealt with in lots of ways. I wrote "The Last of the Winnebagos" about losing lots of things—drive-in movies and endangered species. In that story, dogs have disappeared, which is something we love but could lose. As an older person, I face the loss of things every day. The ice-cream soda is disappearing. I'm sure the ice cream soda still exists somewhere, but in 50 years it probably won't. I mean things die every day, not just people and that's why I think the world is so sad for older people. Even though they haven't gone, the world that they once knew has completely vanished. Everything looks so alien.

WH, KS, EJT: The loss of books in Saint Paul's Cathedral was a heartbreaking part of the story.

CW: I did not know that story until I started researching the book. It was such a horrible thing. Old Saint Paul's burned down in the great fire of London. The booksellers and the publishers in that area moved all their books to the crypts. They didn't just move them and stack them in the basement, they bricked them in so they would be safe against fire. However, the roof collapsed on Saint Paul's. It crashed through the crypt and opened it up. Everything was super-heated, so it went up like a bomb. The books were completely incinerated, instantly, leaving no trace. They don't know what books were stored there. I came up with some titles that are known, and I faked others. It is logical to assume that an author might have had a new book that was destroyed. It was just horrible and perfect for my story.

WH, KS, EJT: Why did you chose a blogger as your protagonist? What blogs, if any, do you read regularly? And do you blog?

CW: I am basically a Luddite; I'm being dragged, kicking and screaming into the 21st century. Well first into the 20th century, and then into the 21st century. I do have a website. I do post things on my website periodically. I avoid Twitter like the plague because I have a really smart mouth and it's really easy to get in trouble on twitter. I'm usually not political on my website but occasionally, when I feel it is absolutely necessary. One of the reasons I chose a blogger was I wanted someone not particularly sympathetic to books. He's part of the new world of people who think 'books are dying', and feel 'so what, it's dead trees anyway, and we're better off without them. After all, they're all on the cloud.' I didn't want someone actively opposed to books, but I needed him to gradually come to

see the nature of this tragedy. Had he been an old book lover, who found a mysterious bookshop, he would have immediately [realized] what was going on, recognizing names of famous books that no longer exist.

Issues of Preserving the Past

WH, KS, EJT: Jim's beginning stance in this story is pro-technology and cavalier towards history and preservation of the past. Do you think that our culture is like Jim?

CW: Always, always, and that's everybody. It's every generation, nobody ever understands or appreciates the past. It is difficult for them to really empathize. When I was writing *Doomsday Book*, I was furious at the historians, who seemed to have no empathy for the people that lived through the Black Death. They would say that people in those days were used to losing their kids all the time, so they didn't get attached. Really? [They would say that] death was an omni-present factor in their lives, so they didn't think anything of it. That's not what I read in the contemporary notes. They were us and these terrible things were happening to them. I remember during the researching of that book, finding out about a Neanderthal's grave for a baby. They had buried a pair of little rabbit fur slippers with the baby. They are us...and they felt exactly the same as we do. Their lives are very different but the same. This is one of the big messages of all of my writing. I don't blame it on this generation, it's every generation. I was the same, when my grandmother would tell me about things she was really upset about losing. I would not be that impressed. Now I am having the same thing happen to me, so I understand it better. I think we all suffer from that. When I wrote, "Even the Queen," it was about how kids never appreciate the sacrifices their parents made and all the freedoms that they fought for. The kids are not only oblivious to, but sometimes even openly reject them. It's just so upsetting when they do, and you just want to shake them.

Edna Ferber is one of my favorite writers and that was always a theme of her books. She wrote multi-generation sagas about Texas and Oklahoma. The characters were scrabbling and dying to make a decent life so that their kids could go off to a big fancy college in the east. Then they came back, and were dismissive of this life that they had created for them. It is a common theme of humanity.

I think techno geeks might be the most naïve people on the planet. Whenever I'm at a panel with them, I'm just blown away by their lack of knowledge of how history works. They'll say, it's all in the cloud. And I think, okay, but something could go wrong with the cloud and then what? You have destroyed all the physical copies. The nice thing about having physical books is that they are all over the place, and it is really hard to get all of them. If you started burning books tomorrow, you still couldn't get all of the copies of *1984*. The thing that drives me the craziest is when I say, there are always unintended consequences and nasty side effects. [And they respond], Oh no, not with this technology. As opposed to all the other technology, since the wheel! This one will be somehow

different? They really believe that. They are convinced of that. My computer crashed two days before I finished my novel [as I was] printing it out to send it in, but I had hard copies in the refrigerator because that is the safest place in your house. In a fire it is the last place to burn. (Good place to hide money too, for that same reason.) I did have to scan it in, but I hadn't lost it. I know people who have lost their novels, literally lost their novels. It never occurred to you that this could happen, have you never seen a movie? Have you never read a book? Do you not know that this is the way the world works? I think that every generation is the same, they just don't understand how history works. Or how technology disappears. My husband and I are probably the last people in Greeley to have a VHS player. We keep buying a backup, because we are afraid they will just stop making them. We have a bunch of movies that will never make the jump to streaming or even DVD. It is the same for LPs and CDs. My real rant is that techno-people just do not see. They have the same quality as religious zealous. They can't see anything else; they're wearing blinders. I feel it's our job as writers to point out that fact.

WH, KS, EJT: We are glad that you have brought more attention to the issue of book preservation and disaster planning and the need for deliberate and proactive decision making. Do you think most archives and libraries are doing enough in this area?

CW: Probably not but I do think they are becoming more aware, since the awful years where they were going through and ruthlessly cutting out all kinds of old books. It's still happening. A library in New Mexico just decided that it should be an information center rather than a library and stripped out all these old books, many of them unique to that area. They ruthlessly got rid of tons of books to make space for computers, and, of course, new offices for the administration. I do think they are more aware, but I think there were a lot of dark days where things were thrown out right and left. There have been several really good books written on that subject which I've used as research for my book (about how when you transfer newspapers to microfilm, you're losing the ads, you're losing the size, you're losing all kinds of things). All these other forms besides books are much less durable than the book itself—especially the intermediate stuff like tape and microfilm. The horrors or what happened in the movie industry were also a good warning to libraries. We lost so many films. In the early days, they simply taped over everything. They just cleaned the film and used it again. So many early movies are just gone. There's a Lilian Gish that is missing. You would open the cans and just find goo. The great news was that things sent to the Soviet Union and to Australia never came back because it was too far and expensive to ship back. You just shipped it to Australia last and then left it there. They're finding some of these lost films in these places. These horror stories are making libraries more aware of what's happening. They need to use the modern information systems to make sure what they are culling in their library is not the last copy. Everyone is making the assumption that it's somewhere, we don't need it; but it's not anywhere.

WH, KS, EJT: *In this region, it is "I'm sure the University of Colorado at Boulder's got it."*

CW: Exactly. Maybe they're thinking the same thing. I understand, *Common Diseases of Sheep* or *A Salute to Cheese* are not *Moby Dick*. On the other hand, they are a part of history and they are a part of social fabric and each one is a loss no matter how small. I noticed down at our public library they were pitching things. They told me anything that hasn't been checked out for a year they get rid of. But I use these books! I just don't come and check them out; I come and spend the day at the library and I don't check them out. After that, I started checking them out, bringing them home and bringing them back the next day so that they would at least show a checkout; I told people to do that in *Bellwether*. I would say public libraries are probably guiltier than college libraries. I think college libraries have kept their archival function much more than public libraries, which sometimes looked to me like your local bookstore.

When I have been doing research lately (trying to find examples of writing in different classic books), I go to our public library system and they don't have anything. They don't have *Moby Dick*, *Three Men in a Boat*, or a complete set of Agatha Christie. And I'm thinking, what are you doing? [They'd respond], we need to make room for these new books because nobody reads these anymore. [I respond], now they can't because you don't have them. I frequently feel it is the administration of libraries rather than the libraries themselves. They want to be trend setting and modern and they are perfectly willing to call the library an information center instead of the library...and they have no understanding or love of books. That really is deadly. I have no idea what you can do. You're going to get lost in every generation, you know, but I think individuals need to fight for the stuff they love and the stuff they don't want to see go away. One of the [conversations] I have frequently at conventions is "Well who are some of your favorite writers?" I'll say, "Oh I love Rumer Godden, who wrote *An Episode of Sparrows*" and [they'll say], "Oh my god! I haven't heard of her in years. I love that book!" You get these connections out there. I just finished a blog about our trip this summer to Saratoga Springs and I talked about *Saratoga Trunk* [by Edna Ferber], which is a great book. But I also talked about Damon Runyan, who's one of my favorite authors. I'm going to do a whole blog on Damon Runyan because he's one of those authors that's slipping away from people's consciousness, and he is wonderful and not to be forgotten. I do try to speak out about the books I love.

Librarians in the Breech

WH, KS, EJT: *As librarians, we identify with Cassie [the female protagonist who supervises the warehouse operations]. First, why didn't she wear sensible shoes?*

CW: I'm not sure she's entirely real or entirely as she appears to Jim. She appears to him the way Jim would like her to appear. But you are right, they are bad shoes—they are bad

for anybody, especially for walking miles [through the warehouse]. I want to say [more] about Cassie. I'm always so impressed by people who work doing something hopeless (but they are not effective if they cry all the time so they can't get over-emotional). [She is] somebody who knows full well that she is fighting a losing battle, but she is doing the best she can. But whether she is real or not is another question all together.

Nothing Lasts Forever

WH, KS, EJT: The story references Shelley's sonnet Ozymandias. When did you first encounter Shelley and Ozymandias?

CW: I love *Ozymandias*; I probably read it in college. It's one of my favorite poems and it's a problem. I have so much trouble reconciling with his poems, which are really good, because he was just such a jerk [in his personal life]. That poem is just so haunting and so true. I think it is the most modern—the least Victorian—and of course is full of irony. We still don't understand that poem. We don't get it that we will vanish like the Egyptians did and it's just inconceivable to us that what we are doing will suffer the same fate as the past. Apparently at Pompei, someone wrote on a wall "nothing lasts forever." Really it doesn't. I was at a convention just recently and one of the writers I was talking [with] said "How do you feel that you'll be completely forgotten in 50 years?" [I said], "I don't know, how should I feel? Well, I feel that Thornton Wilder's novels are almost completely forgotten and he's way better than me, so I really can't complain a lot for being also forgotten. I'm in good company." [The writer] did not approve of that answer; [he said] "You should be upset that we are going to be completely forgotten." I know, but what can I do about that? I have no control over it. Mendelssohn was the person who brought back Bach. He was completely forgotten, and then Mendelssohn found Bach as a music major and loved him and that's why we have him today. Mendelssohn saved him. I mean everything goes away; I don't have to like it though.

WH, KS, EJT: Is there any book of yours that you fear that will disappear?

CW: Well, it would be very ironic if *this story* just vanished from the face of the earth. I loved so many unworthy books. I loved Grace Livingston Hill, who wrote in the [19]20s. [Her books] are sold by Christian publishers now and they're usually pretty terrible. She was a good writer but then the last fifty pages are all sermons and I of course ignored that when I was reading them as a kid. They were set in the 20's so they had roadsters and flappers and short hair and girls who wore makeup and were really sinful. *The White Flower* was about a young woman, an orphan who is traveling to California to what she thinks is a job but actually the people were white slavers. Then she's rescued by this handsome young man and then they jump off a train and all this I love. It's a book that nobody else would consider worth saving at all. I loved that book and it would break my

heart to think that it vanished off the face of the earth. There were so many books like that. I loved *Little Women*—that’s not going anywhere probably—and even *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Anne of Green Gables*. Those books are secure but lots of what I’ve read was not anything anybody would ever save in a flood, kill themselves to rescue, and yet they meant so much to me. I think everyone has those kinds of books and it’s tragic that those books will vanish. Francis Hodgson Burnett wrote *Secret Garden* which years and years later inspired Rumer Godden to write *An Episode of Sparrows*. My eighth-grade teacher read *An Episode of Sparrows* to me and that got me interested in writing about the Blitz. [At a recent convention] a writer [approached] me and said, “I just wanted you to know it was thanks to you that I got interested in World War II and now I’m writing a novel about it.” That’s how the immortality works – because I read Thornton Wilder and I put something of his in my book and somebody else will read that and [so on] you know. I think that is how it works, so Grace Livingston Hill will live on even if her book doesn’t, but it’s still sad.

WH, KS, EJT Are there any books that you actually hope [would] disappear?

CW: You know, it’s all so personal. Topping my list would probably be *Love Story* by Eric Segal which I hated from the moment it came out. I just despise that story. On the other hand, my husband loves that movie. He just loves it. It reminds him of his college days. His irony meter is not set as high as mine. I think it’s a terrible book, [but] for a lot of people it’s not. I would certainly hate to be the one...that’s why I never would recommend we need to get rid of this.

One time I was at the [public] library and I was researching history and I found a book by Pat Buchanan and it had “history” in the title. It was shelved in the history [section] but it was one of his political diatribes. I took it to the front desk and I said, “This book is shelved incorrectly; it doesn’t belong in history, it belongs over here in politics.” She said, “Well, I would just like to just get rid of it all together.” And I said, “You’re a librarian, what are you saying?” I hate every word that is in this book but I don’t want to burn it. I don’t believe in it, that’s not how I function. Once you start talking about getting rid of books and protecting the children or protecting us from ideas. You hear a lot of the college kids saying they don’t want to hear these speakers, they don’t want to have these books, these books trigger them. All these ideas make them uncomfortable. They don’t think these books should be included in the library. If you look at the list of the 100 top banned books every year it is always *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Huck Finn*, they’re all classics. The reasons people say they want to censor and the real reasons they censor are completely different. You can’t trust anybody to censor anything, including *Mein Kampf*. There are always people who think we shouldn’t have it in the library. Have you learned nothing from Hitler? We can’t burn books, we can’t. You get rid of them and then they’re gone for good and when we need them, we can’t get them back.

WH, KS, EJT: Well, what is the greatest threat you see to our literary heritage?

CW: Oh, I don't know. In some ways I see no threat to it because story is alive and well and will continue no matter what form it takes. I would say for this century, the form stories take is the form of a movie or TV series and that right now is a much more thriving form. But it's still very connected to books and most of the people writing screenplays are people who love books and got all their ideas from books. In that sense, I would hate to see reading go away, but those are my personal feelings and the way I was raised. I would say the greatest threat to literary heritage is this idea that literature should not make you uncomfortable, that it should not have anything in it that you disagree with, that it should simply be there to reinforce ideas that you already have. I can't imagine where *Anna Karenina* fits into this, if we're not allowed to be made uncomfortable. A mark of a really good book is that I cried all the way through, but it was interesting. I taught [writing students] at Clarion West. We had a particular story that had a really emotional thing in it and the criticism was that it was so emotional, that it made them really mad. I said well, you can be mad because you think this story didn't work properly. But if the things that happened in the story made you angry, then that story is a real success because it actually made you feel something. You're supposed to feel something. You're supposed to feel anger or sadness or realize that you've thought one way about something and now you've had to reassess how you thought about it. All those things are what reading is about. I think if we get the idea that reading is simply supposed to support our own ideas, that would be very bad and a real danger. Because from there it's easy to go to book burning, easy, easy, easy.

Changing the World

WH, KS, EJT: Do you hope to open minds and change attitudes with your writing?

CW: No, not really. I think it was Greg Feeley, another science fiction writer, who said that everybody talks about books changing the world, but they're always talking about something like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But *Huck Finn* is the book that really changed the world. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made short-term changes, but long-term...I think he said all literature changes lives at the water table level, meaning that it goes way underground. It takes two hundred years to percolate up, but it slowly, slowly changes people's attitudes and I think that's very true. So, on the one hand, yes obviously, I had an axe to grind, several axes—and I genuinely care about the issue. I wanted that to come through. But I also love the mysterious book shop genre and I wanted to provide people with an entertaining story that maybe would also make them think. Whenever you end up preaching in a story, you've lost your people, just like Grace Livingston Hill lost her people. I never read the last 50 pages you know, let's skip right to the end. I don't think that is the way to change minds

and hearts. I do think that it is show don't tell...the oldest of writing shibboleths but the truest, really the truest.

We went to see the Fred Rogers movie *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* and it was so amazing what he did. He was fighting a losing battle the whole way, because he was fighting against violence and consumerism and all these things that are rampant in television and really, you can't say he won. But that doesn't matter; he fought. The most amazing thing in the movie was, he had an episode where the African-American policeman comes by and Mr. Rogers is soaking his feet in the wading pool and he says, "It's a really hot day so I'm just soaking my feet in the wading pool. Would you like to do that too?" And the cop says, "well that sure does look nice" and [Rogers] says, "Well, come on in!" So, the cop takes off his shoes and socks and then he gets in the wading pool, too. They just sit there and talk, and Mr. Rogers sprays his feet and sprays both of their feet and then he wipes it with a towel and that's straight out of the Bible. You know, he was a Presbyterian minister, but it's "show don't tell." Then what I hadn't known, because I've seen that episode and of course at the time, it was really groundbreaking. Now you wouldn't think anything of it and that's the point. That's what Mr. Rogers did—he brought us from there to here—but [two weeks prior to the time he originally produced that show] a man had poured [acidic] chemicals into a swimming pool [to force blacks out of the pool and Mr. Rogers] had read that in the paper and he said, "We have to do something about this." He was a real revolutionary, but it didn't ever come across; you never felt that he was preaching at all. I think the Fred Rogers method was the best. I was very angry at the end of the movie [when it] asked everybody, "so what would he do today? Would he just give up, would he just think the world was going completely to pieces and he wouldn't even try?" And [people responded], "I think he would be completely overwhelmed; he would just be so upset and he probably wouldn't even try." And I'm [thinking], what are you talking about? He tried his whole life. The world was really terrible, and he tried and he made some differences. That's what he would be doing today, nothing would be different. And I felt that was a real disservice, these were all people that loved him and knew him but I didn't feel they had him pegged at all because you always fight no matter whether it is a losing cause or not, and you don't know what will make the difference.

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