

## Q & A WITH ANDREW C. MURPHY, AUTHOR OF STEEL SKY



**Q:** *The world that you've created in *Steel Sky* portrays a very dystopic vision. Domestic spying and involuntary euthanasia are commonplace. Can you discuss some of the elements of this dystopia and their relevance to the modern world?*

A: I don't consider *Steel Sky* to be a dystopia; I see it as a testament to the adaptability of the human species, and I don't consider many of the situations in it to be far-fetched. Right now in America, we are so rich that we don't need to make the hard choices. We can have a war on two fronts without a draft. We can lower taxes and raise spending. I wanted to create an environment where people would have to make those choices. Do we want to pay lawyers and lobbyists millions of dollars to argue with one another, or do we want to use that money to provide basic services to thousands of people? Don't think we won't have to ask these questions in the near future. In twenty years we're going to run out of cheap oil, and that will lead to a crisis that will make *Steel Sky* look like a day at the beach.

**Q:** *Many people have commented on the book's sensitive treatment of sexual assault against a woman. As a male author, how did you pull this off?*

A: Rape is a fairly common event in adventure fiction, usually as a means to jump start the plot, but the long-term psychological effects are rarely hinted at, much less explored. And that's odd, considering that we have a hidden epidemic of sexual abuse in this country. Chances are someone you know has been abused, and you'd know it if you would only listen. The victims never look at anything quite the same way afterwards. They can learn to function again, but a certain joy has been lost to them forever. Most of them don't want revenge; they only want the man who abused them to acknowledge he did something wrong, and to make sure he doesn't do it to anyone else. And they don't have to be mutilated or sodomized to be hurt. It's important to acknowledge that any abuse is traumatic.

**Q:** *The environmental aspects of *Steel Sky* range from traditional to unusual; from the air rendered unbreathable through industrial carelessness to the recycling of corpses for food, fuel, and recreational drugs. Can you tell us anything about where these ideas came from? How significant are they to the story?*

A: The air pollution comes from real life. A while back I spent a month in Taipei, Taiwan, which is a major, industrialized city in a valley. Imagine Los Angeles without the pollution control laws. For a few days a thermal inversion trapped all the air in the city. You could see the smog in the air. You could smell it with every breath. People were walking around wearing surgical masks, which of course did nothing. It was awful.

Once I had the idea for the underground city I started to wonder how the inhabitants would live. How could they breathe? What would they eat? What would it do to their psyches? I gave them one renewable resource, the river, which proved them with fresh water, hydroelectric power, hydrogen, oxygen, and a waste disposal system. Everything else they would have to recycle or do without. The more I explored the possibilities, the more interesting the story got.

***Q: During the course of the novel, the Winnower changes from a vigilante hero to a tortured soul who makes reprehensible choices and is cheered for doing so. A thing at its most extreme has become its opposite. Does this arc reflect some aspect of your own life or how you view the world?***

A: Inevitably the first priority of people in power is to make sure they keep their power. The second priority is to make their lives, and the lives of the people they care for, more comfortable. Actually doing something positive with that power is a distant third. Even the most caring and careful people can cause terrible harm to others just by acting rashly or even by making a simple mistake. Most adventure fiction takes the easy way out, assuring us that good intentions alone are enough. They aren't, and I think a lot of problems in this world could be avoided if only people in power acted with a little more humility.

***Q: In the Hypogeum, the Orcus family maintains their ruling status through unlimited access to a sophisticated and secret video surveillance system. Do you think that privacy is something that has to be violated in order to keep the peace? Are these violations merely an agent of civil control for those in power?***

A: I know I'm supposed to be outraged that the government will know which books I take out of the library, but it doesn't really bother me. I'm a firm believer in the scientific method, and the scientific method requires raw data to formulate a hypothesis, then more focused information to test that hypothesis. Scientific observation is a much better process to base your actions on than the one most people use now: a hodgepodge of hunches, preconceptions, and wishful thinking. So I'm in favor of the free flow of information. The real problem is what is done on the basis of that information. We should be objecting to prejudice, arrogance, and brutality, not information.

***Q: Amarantha's status as a genetically engineered citizen gives rise to some dramatic moments. Would you say that genetic modification is an indispensable part of the Steel Sky story?***

A: Absolutely. Amarantha's problems as one of the Engineered are a direct refutation of the philosophy of writers like Nancy Kress, Larry Niven, and Ayn Rand. The idea that the cream of society naturally rises to the top simply doesn't reflect reality. There's only so much room at the top, and the people already there don't want to give up their places.

Amarantha is smarter and more courageous than most of the people around her, but it leads to nothing but heartache. To a certain extent, the prejudice against the Engineered is based on the plight of the Jews. They seem to have more than their fair share of geniuses, but it hasn't done them much good over the centuries, has it?

***Q: In the character of Image, we see a godlike creation serving the therapeutic needs of a populace that created it. What are the metaphysical implications here if any? How important is psychotherapy and what does it mean about humanity that we can trust a machine more than each other?***

A: I don't think I'll shock anybody when I say psychotherapy is 90% bull. A big part of the problem is that therapists are only human. They have preconceptions like anyone else, they get bored and careless, they can empathize only so much. Subjective re-interpretation of the outside world is the problem. A machine could do the job better, as they can do everything better, if they're only programmed properly. Our culture has an innate fear of machines, which is absurd considering how much easier they make our lives. At the same time, I think it's important to remember that even the most perfectly programmed machine is only an imitation of humanity. That's why I refer to Image as a "simulated intelligence" rather than an "artificial intelligence," which I think is impossible.

*Q: At one point in the novel, the ethics of Doctor Edward Penn are called into question when he makes a diagnosis that effectively condemns a patient to death — even if there may be the faintest ray of hope. Would you discuss your personal feelings on this matter and why you chose to include it in the novel?*

A: I think Dr. Penn is too hard on himself. I see a lot of his actions as inevitable, or at least understandable, given the circumstances. He didn't write the rules that govern the treatment of patients with chronic conditions, and if he tried to save everyone he'd eventually have his license revoked. He did a lot better than most other men might have done in the same situation. But at the same time, he is partially responsible for someone's death. There are no easy answers. We all have a little blood on our hands.

*Q: Do you have any advice for would-be novelists that want to tackle something as elaborate as Steel Sky?*

A: You have to start with a few good ideas, and you can't force that. They don't have to be original ideas, but you have to have a new perspective on them. Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick both wrote novels that took place in underground cities, but neither of them examined the ecological or psychological limitations of living in such a place. Take an old idea and approach it from a new direction.

Limitations — be they physical, social, or psychological — are critical to a good story. They give your characters something to strive against, and without conflict you have no plot. In addition, they force you to ask tough questions about the world you've created, which lead to innovative answers. Impose constraints on yourself; you'll be amazed how much it frees you.

Draw from your own life. If you can't really feel what your characters are feeling then they won't be real to your reader. Your story may still have plenty of action, but it will fail to engage the reader on an emotional level. When writing about the rift between Orel and Bernie, I drew from my feelings about the collapse of an old friendship of my own. I used my own feelings about being mugged to image how Amarantha might feel after being assaulted.

Above all, remember that if what you're writing doesn't excite you, it certainly won't interest your reader.

*Q: The end of Steel Sky leaves plenty of room for a sequel. Are you planning more books with the same characters? What can readers expect next from you?*

A: Sequels are the graveyard of many a great idea. I'm hoping to get a short story — "Paradise Apprais'd", about a time-travel team that goes back to the Garden of Eden — done in the next few months. It's a meditation on the true essence of faith, and on the current conflict between evangelicals and everybody else. I'm also working on *Eternal Dawn*, a novel about life on a planet that rotates very slowly, so that all the life on the planet has to migrate with the dawn or dusk in order to survive.