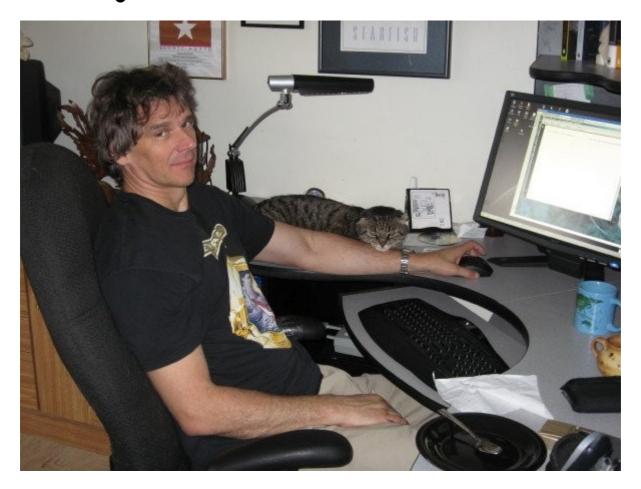**Autor: Marcin 'malakh' Zwierzchowski**
Ilustracje: Danielle MacDonald
Redaktor: Michał 'M.S.' Smętek

Wywiad z Peterem Wattsem

How did you came up with the idea for „Blindsight"?

The central question of the novel— "What the hell is consciousness good for?"— has been percolating in my brain ever since the early nineties, when it was asked almost offhandedly in an afterword that Richard Dawkins wrote for a collection of essays on evolution (although I've forgotten the actual name of that book). That said, though, there are a *lot* of ideas in that book: vampire biology, gene-free evolution, telematter drives— and those ideas came from all over the place. You might in fact be surprised by how much of that book I *didn't* make up— and for those who want specifics, *Blindsight* includes a technical appendix citing over a hundred sources.

You said, that if "Blindsight" hadn't come along, the title would be "Dandelion". Now, I can clearly see, how the term "blindsight" is appropriate for your novel… but "dandelion"?

Dandelions are generally clones, reproducing asexually and with very little genetic diversity. For a while I thought that they might be a decent metaphor for the scramblers, whose seeds got blown across the cosmos and just happened to take root in our back yards. Unkillable, asexual weeds.

Of course, I was wrong. Dandelions are a pretty lame metaphor for scramblers, and it would have been an even lamer title for a book. Let's leave it at that.

You once said that "Blindsight" contains elements of autobiography.

All my novels do, to some extent: *write what you know*, as the saying goes, so pretty much all my books are populated by amalgams of people I know in real life. In *Blindsight*'s case, though, one of those people was me; a long-term relationship I'd been in was crashing and burning during the second draft, and a lot of that despair and emotional disconnection found its way into Siri's relationshiop with Chelsea. It wasn't so much that the factual specifics of those scenes were autobiographical; but certainly some of the attitudes and ambience were.

Also, I pretty much live by Siri's never-tell-anyone-your-birthday principle.

How did the work on "Blindsight" looked like? How long did it take, form starting your research to finishing your book?

It took me less than a year to write the actual novel, but the reasearch is an ongoing process with no real beginning or end. I try and keep up with relevant science as part of my daily routine (which has become both a lot easier and infitely more difficult thanks to the proliferation of the online community: new information is at your fingertips, but there's so damn *much* of it now that wading through it all tends to devour your day). As I've mentioned, the central kernal of *Blindsight* was something I read in the early nineties; much of the peripheral stuff I learned earlier still, during my grad school days; and hardly a day goes by when I don't encounter some piece of late-breaking news that can't factor into a novel or a short story. I add bits and pieces of new material to each novel I write, right through to the galley stage. So you could say, quite accurately, that I've been researching *Blindsight* for decades, and that even now I'm researching a novel that I won't write for another ten years. I just don't know that that's what I'm doing at the time.

"Blindsight" is dense with some kick-ass ideas. One of them are the "alien" aliens; the other one is a blood-sucking captain - Jukka Sarasti. Why aren't your aliens green and E.T.-like and why the hell did you send a vampire into space?

I'm not ruling out a green alien (although if I did create one, it would probably be photosynthetic and that would have to factor into the plot somehow). I don't do ET-like aliens because ET was essentially a fairy tale, not a serious piece of extrapolative exobiology. And I don't do your standard Star Trek wrinkly-headed humanoids because prose doesn't come with budgetary restrictions on the breadth of its vision.

What comes first (what is more important to you) in your books: the story or the ideas?

That's a little like asking whether I place higher value on the lyrics or the tune of a song: a failure in either department can kill my enjoyment of the whole. Chronologically, the ideas come first: cool ideas inspire me to tell stories that explore them. (I have never, in contrast, decided that I wanted to tell a particular story and then looked around for cool scientific ideas to pad out the plot.) That said, though, some of those cool ideas never made it onto the page because I couldn't think of an especially compelling story to go along with them— and without a decent plot, I might as well just write an essay. (You might want to pause here to give some of your readers the chance to point out that that's pretty much what I do anyway.)

In Poland "Blindsight" was published in "Feast for Imagination" series, along side with Stross's "Accelerando", MacLeod's "The Light Ages" and "House of Storms", Duncan's "Vellum" and "Ink" and Bishop's "The Etched City". Have you read any of this? How do feel in their company?

I've read (and been impressed by) Charlie Stross's work; one of MacLaeod's novel's ("The Cassini Division") is on my bookshelf but I haven't cracked it open yet. Duncan and Bishop have both been recommended to me, but I haven't read their work.

But if you're asking how I *feel* to be in their company, I can only say: honoured. Certainly my own professional stature pales in comparison to these folks.

I know that you weren't particularly pleased with the original "Blindsigth" cover art (and that's why we can find several alternative versions on your website). What was it about it, that you dislike?

Let me just say up front that the artist's work is generally terrific (in fact, I used it for the unauthorised alternate covers I posted online). And Tor's Art Department has generally done very well by me for my other books: I love the pictures Bruce Jensen rendered for the rifters trilogy. So I'm dumping on neither the artist nor the Art Department in general here— but if I had to choose one to dump on, in this specific case, it would be Tor's art department. Because I saw the sketches that Thomas Pringle originally submitted to Tor, and I saw the one Tor chose, and it wasn't bad at all— but then they made him change it. They made him replace his vision of a grungy, Nostromoesque *Theseus* with something like looked like a Buck Rogers corkscrew with fins, something that had all the depth and detail of a pencil sketch, something that somehow managed to be brightly lit against a deep-space background half a lightyear from the nearest star. It was almost as though they'd photoshopped in a spaceship from a different picture by a different artist. And then they framed it with this lurid red border, and rendered the text in an incompatible pea-soup pigment that seemed to have taken its inspiration from the stuff Linda Blair vomited in "The Excorcist". Thankfully, when the trade paper version came out, they'd ditched the border and greatly improved the title font. But to this day I do not know what the art department was thinking when they made those decisions. I've tried to find out, but no one at Tor will talk to me about it except to insist that authors are never allowed to talk to people in the Art department (which is patently untrue; I know of several authors who do that all the time).

On the other hand, you used the term: "kick-ass steampunk cover" and added: "one of the best cover illustrations I've seen for that book", while describing the polish edition cover art. Do you prefer it better than the one Tor stick on "Blindsight"?

Very much so. I don't suppose you'd know how I could get a full-sized print, would you? All I have are a couple of small jpegs I grabbed off the web.

Publishing "Blindsight" wasn't as easy as one might think, considering all the reviews and the Hugo nomination. I've heard that you had make some painful cuts, to make sure, that it wouldn't end up being released in two parts, like your previous novel – "Behemoth".

That is true. And to those who would complain that *Blindsight* skimped on character development, or that its technical themes were not presented with sufficient clarity, I can only say: I feel your pain. The draft I originally handed in was thousands of words less than what the contract called for, and they *still* said it was too long. So you lost some important character development. You lost some of the groundwork that paved the way for plot developments. You didn't lose anything that was absolutely essential— the road still gets you from A to B— but the road got a lot bumpier as a result of those cuts.

In an interview for "Locus" you said, that it even got to a point, when you have to take a break from writing.

It wasn't the writing of *Blindsight* that that wore me out so much as the hassle of dealing with the duplicitous and capricious beast that is Tor (my publisher), or at least with the one or two people

therein that I had any contact with. By the time *Blindsight* was published I was too discouraged to write anything for a couple of years. If it hadn't done so well I'd probably still be in that mood.

Of course, the irony is that now that I'm raring to go on a whole fistful of projects, the industry has melted down and there's no market for my stuff anyway.

You said: "Even if we have the technology to become better people right at the molecular level, we'll pass it up…". And yet from "Blindsight" one could draw opposite conclusions.

Interesting point. It does seem to me that we were shaped by Darwinian forces acting to protect the self, and if the self changes into something else, it stops *being* the self. So we'll resist rapid radical transformation, since on a gut level we would regard that as a kind of suicide. Oh, we'll happily embrace changes that amount to "more of the same, only better": biotechnology or virtual reality that brings us closer to ideal human archetypes (stronger, faster, smarter), without changing our basic sense of self. But arguments towards truly radical change ("You know, we'd be a lot better off if we turned ourselves into purple cephalopods with eight eyes") will be met with revulsion ("Dadburnit, that just ain't *natural*.") So I suspect that our own gut instinct will put a brake on any headlong rush to true posthumanism. Human nature likes itself pretty much the way it is.

Now, *Blindsight* is a whole different issue, because at the heart of *Blindsight* is an intelligent species that lacks consciousness— there *is* no sentient "self" to recoil at radical change, to feel a sense of "right" or "wrong" in the gut. And they pretty much kick our asses. One of the human characters suggests offhandedly that we might even the playing field by engineering self-awareness out of ourselves, but even then— when death seems certain— it's a rhetorical suggestion, not meant to be taken seriously. As Amanda Bates says in the book, What's the difference between being dead and just not knowing you're alive?

Your website www.rifters.com is full of additional information and background for your novels. Why did you decided to put on yourself such an amount of extra work? Is it only passion that drives you?

Passion, to some extent: I get caught up in the world, I like to explore parts of it in ways that go beyond pure prose. But there's also the purely self-promotional aspect to this thing. The average author's website is so self-aggrandising, so full of shameless chest-thumping and used-car-salesman huckstering to BUY MY BOOK!!! that I can barely look at them without cringeing. And yet, I'm as much of a attention-slut as the next guy. I too crave fame and fortune. I just can't bring myself to be so, so *craven* about it.

So I've got a website, and it's as shiney as my rudimentary amateursih coding skills can make it— but instead of focussing on Peter Watts Sci Fi Author it focuses on the material in my novels. I'm trying to cultivate a sense of verité to the whole thing, the sense that the web-surfer has stumbled into a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a real future: technical briefings, corporate memos, epidemiological maps and conference presentations. It all comes together, one hopes, to create a compelling background jigsaw for my novels, bait that hopefully inspires curious readers to buy the books— so while there's a lot of promotion, not all that much of it is obvious *self*-promotion. So I can sleep at night without feeling like the obnoxious guy at parties who never stops bragging.

One can't help to notice that you are not a big fan of happy endings. This concerns not only all of your short stories, but "Blindsight" to. I've read that you even had to change the ending of your first novel, "Starfish", because your agent said that it would be to negative for American audiences. Those futile endings where the reason, why non of your short stories were published in "Analog". Do you do it on purpose or it just happens?

Just happens, mostly Once I forced myself to write a story with a happy ending and it seemed contrived, hackneyed, and tacked-on. Happy or unhappy, it just wasn't a *good* ending. But honestly, it's not as though I deliberately set out to write downbeat endings; I start with a science-based idea, a what-if question, and then follow the data wherever they lead, to a happy ending or a grim one. It's just that for whatever reason, the data on the subjects I pursue always seem to point down.

You are a marine biologist. How did you end up being a writer?

Unemployment. Basically, I walked out of academia when it became obvious that my boss was more interested in keeping our sponsors happy than in actually finding out what was causing the collapse of sea-lion populations in the North Pacific. (Three guesses as to which potential cause my boss found least palatable. Here's a hint: ninety percent of our research funding was coming from the US commercial fishing industry.)

I'd wanted to be a writer for as long as I'd wanted to be a marine biologist (I remember when I first decided on both those careers; I was six years old). I'd even had a few short stories published in little dick-ass Canadian magazines that nobody's ever heard of. But now I had no job, few prospects, and little in the way of savings. Obviously the most logical thing to do was to sit down and write a science fiction novel, and hope it would sell a year or two down the road.

So that's when I wrote *Starfish*.

How does the fact that you are a scientist effects on your writing?

I don't know whether it gives more than it takes. On the one hand, there's no denying the street cred it gives me, or the fact that my science background grants my work a rigor not found in the output of a lot of other sf writers (even a lot of the so-called "hard" ones). And yet, I grow increasingly convinced that too much scientific expertise straitjackets the imagination. You see so many flaws in every science-fictional conceit that you find yourself rejecting interesting ideas simply because you know that "well, *that* wouldn't work that way…" If we've learned anything, it should be that the models keep changing, that what we "knew" yesterday is liable to be disproven tomorrow (twenty years ago, who'd ever heard of dark energy?). It's just that as scientists we get so invested in *this* decade's scientific paradigms that it's sometimes difficult to remember that there's going be a *next* decade's paradigm set as well.

The most cutting-edge, rigorous science fiction I ever wrote was state-of-the-art when I sold it, and obsolete by the time the story saw print. On the other hand, the one unrepetant fantasy I ever wrote — a completely unresearched brait fart about intelligent microbes in the clouds, affecting the world's weather patterns— actually proved almost prescient when, ten years later, sciencts actually started looking for microbes in the clouds that might be changing the world's weather. I think there's a moral there somewhere.

All of your novels and short stories are SF. What is it about that genre, that you like so much? Didn't you ever were tempted to try to write something else – fantasy, maybe?

When it comes to fantasy, I'm too good to write the crappy stuff, and I'm not good enough to pull off the good stuff.

The crappy stuff would be the usual hackneyed Tolkein retreads, young-adult vampire stories, and the usual kiddy fantasies about the unpopular outcast who turns out to be The Chosen One. That doesn't interest me. The *good* stuff— the genre-twisting efforts of China Mieville and Jeff VanderMeer, to name a couple— require not just the invention of new worlds but new *sensibilities*, new laws of physics.. I'm not up to that; I still need the crutch of an extant reality, real science, to build my stories from. Building new sciences from scratch? Maybe some day. Not yet.

What is your opinion on the role of SF? Should it be an attempt to predict the future, to warn people? What kind of reaction you're trying to accomplish with your books?

I don't know if anyone in the field seriously believes that science fiction's purpose is to predict the future; we're pretty bad at it, if so. I have always thought the genre existed not to say "This will happen", but to ask "What *if* this happens? What *then*?" In that sense— as a series of thought experiments exploring potential timelines that haven't yet transpired— it can certainly serve both a cautionary and an aspirational role. At least we can describe which timelines to avoid. The problem, of course, is that nobody fucking listens to us unless they already like what we're telling them.

And as for the kind of reaction I'm trying to provoke with my own books? I guess I'm trying to provoke millions of people into paying their hard-earned money to read them. I wish I could say that I'd been a bit more successful at doing that.

With changes coming so fast, is it easy to be a SF writer – to keep up with modern science?

Oh God, is it ever tough to stay ahead of the curve. Back in the old days, Asimov et. al could write a myriad stories predicated on the belief that, for example, Mercury was tidally-locked in its orbit around the sun, and it would be decades before the astronomers would prove them wrong. These days, the stuff I predict for 2050 either gets disproven six months after publication, or happens in the real world six months *before*. I am constantly revising my novels, right up to the galleys, to try and stay ahead of real discoveries.

Sometimes, though, that actually works to my advantage. Just after I'd written *Blindsight*, papers started appearing in the literature that leaned towards the very conclusions I'd put forth in that book. It was nice to have real science backing me up *after* I'd already gone out on the limb.

One of your short stories is about talking killer whales, in another mankind is endangered by thinking clouds, and in "A Niche" you came up with a controversial theory about the evolution of sociopaths. What inspires you? How do you come up with ideas like this?

Dude. You're interviewing me on the strength of a book that claims that all of our important decision-making and conceptual breakthroughs happen *sub*consciously, out of reach of the little guy behind the eyes who thinks of itself as "I". So where do you *think* my ideas come from?

I don't know. I *can't* know. I don't have conscious access to those subroutines. They just appear in my mental in-box each morning.

Can you tell us something more about this "sociopath theory"?

It seems to me that it's a lot easier for someone without conscience to behave ethically (if it serves her purposes) than it is for someone who is driven by conscience to behave *un*ethically. This means that those without conscience have more options for dealing with any given problem than the rest of us; they can use both ethical and unethical toolkits, while the rest of us have only the

ethical set. This should give sociopaths a competitive advantage, and in fact you do see them disproportionately represented in the highest levels of such fields as law, medicine, and politics.

This turns out to be more than my own little wank, though. A small but growing number of forensic psych people here in Canada are starting to wonder aloud whether conditions like autism and sociopathy may not be so much pathologies as *adaptations*, if sociopaths might be basically a cognitive subspecies of human being adapted to preying on the rest of us. I'm running with this; "cognitive subspecies" figure pretty centrally in the book I'm working on now.

Your work is available free in the Internet on Creative Commons license. How does CC works and why did you decided to be a part of it?

The Creative Commons allows one to set work free under conditions of one's own choosing. In my case, I chose to let people download and distribute my work free of charge, but only for noncommercial purposes; nobody can use my work to make money (at least, not without cutting me in for a share). Granted, the whole thing works on an honour system; if someone in Botswana downloads my work and starts selling it for his own profit, there's not a hell of a lot I can do about that. (Although the one time I know of when that *did* happen— some dude overseas selling all my work on eBay— my blog posting on the subject apparently shamed him so much that he not only apologised profusely, took down my work, and promised never to do it again, but he also stopped seeling the works of all the *other* authors he was stealing from. So maybe guilt has a little more force behind it than I originally believed.) (Obviously this guy was *not* a sociopath; if he had been, he'd continue selling other people's work illicitly and would end up the richer for it. There's that competitive advantage I was talking about.) (Unless, of course, he's a really *good* sociopath who only *pretended* to feel remorse, and is even now still selling other people's work, only less openly...)

Some people go the Creative Commons route as a matter of principle: Cory Docotorow is the poster boy for this sort of thing, and I applaud his stand. On the other hand, Cory is also a genius with a finger in many lucrative pies, and he wouldn't starve even if he didn't make a penny off his fiction. I am less gifted, and less financially secure: the reason *I* resorted to the Creative Commons was because I honestly felt I had nothing left to lose. On the one hand there's my out-of-print backlist, which isn't making me any money anyway, so I might as well offer it freely in the hope that it will attract fans who wouldn't have read my stuff otherwise (either because they couldn't find it, or because they didn't want to pay for the privilege). On the other hand there's *Blindsight*, which I released into the Creative Commons just a month or two after its official publication date; I didn't have much to lose there either because Tor had pretty much written if off as dead coming out of the gate. They gave it negligible promotion, a shoddy cover, and a miniscule print run. Then the critics started raving, the buzz started building, and suddenly Tor couldn't meet the demand. Everyone was reading about how great *Blindsight* was but hardly anybody could actually get their hands on a copy of the damn thing, and even then Tor was dragging their feet about another print run. At that point I figured that *Blindsight* was doomed to be a commercial failure no matter how much critical applause it received, due to its lack of availability. And if it was going to tank anyway, I had nothing to lose by giving it away. At the very least, if enough people read it online, it might have a shot at an award or two.

As it turned out, *Blindsight* did actually manage to pull commercial success from the jaws of defeat. It went into multiple hardcover printings, got translated into a shitload of languages, and while it won no awards whatsoever it did end up on the final ballot of a half-dozen of them. And I owe that entirely to the Creative Commons— or more precisely, to all the free publicity that my Creative Commons release generated. John Scalzi, Kathryn Cramer, and boingboing all pimped *Blindsight* loud and long, and they wouldn't have done that if I hadn't resorted to this half-cocked giveaway strategy. So it wasn't so much the Creative Commons *per sé* that turned things around; it's the fact that the Creative Commons happened to be newsworthy. *Blindsight* would probably also have

undergone a bump in sales if I'd opened up at a shopping mall with a sawed-off shotgun, screaming "BUY MY BOOK!" while gunning down pedestrians. But the Creative Commons had the advantage of being legal.

Which authors had an influence on your writing? Which do you admire and why?

One relative newcomer I'm a fan of is Elizabeth Bear, because her characters are so human and humane; I wish I could draw people as well as she does. Charlie Stross is a phenomenon, and needs no introduction. China Meiville's Bas-Lag is perhaps the most immersive evocation of an alien environmet I've read since *Dune*. Karl Schroeder is much smarter than anyone without formal postgraduate training has any right to be, a dude who writes novels that are not only smart but *fun* (something else I'm not very good at). Ted Chiang hardly ever writes anything, but when he does, it wins every bloody award on the planet. Oh, and how could I forget Cory Doctorow? I don't agree with his endings— way, way too Pollyanna, where the good guys win and evil gets vanquished— but there's not disputing the man has style.

But going back a ways, and remembering the authors that affected my outlook as I was growing into the craft, I'd have to say: John Brunner, first and foremost, for his bitterness and the incredible attention to detail he brought to his dystopias. The research and the anger that went into books like *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up* is nothing short of staggering. I also salute Sam Delany for his gorgeous prose, and early Robert Silverberg as well (before he went all fantasy on us). William Gibson, for his edge and his dialog and his grasp of the grey literature. There are a myriad others— Herbert, Vonnegut, Ellison to name but a few— but while I admire their work, I can't say they've especially influenced my own. Brunner, Delany, Silverberg, Gibson: those were the people who I shamelessly tried to imitate when writing my own prose.

Unfortunately, polish readers haven't had the chance to get to know your earlier work. Maybe you can tell us something about the "Rifters Trilogy" and why is it worth reading?

That's a little like asking the chef if the soup is any good. But if you like deep-sea (and I mean *deep* sea) settings, and dystopias wracked with global ecological collapse, and stories about the healing powers of revenge and the virtues of sexual sadism, the rifters series might be for you. Perhaps my favorite quote regarding that trilogy hails from James Nicoll, who once said, "Whenever I find my will to live becoming too strong, I read Peter Watts."

Other than that, I got nothing.

Currently your working on "State of Grace". From the material I've found on your website I know, that it takes on the vampire plot. Can you say something more?

State of Grace (which I will always think of as "Dumbspeech" in my heart) tells the story of what happens back on Earth during the *Theseus* mission, so of course there will be some thematic overlap in terms of the neurology and utility of consciousness. But the main focus, this time through, is on the neurological underpinnings of religious belief. *State of Grace* endeavours to do to God (and to the Singularity, I suppose) what *Blindsight* did to self-awareness.

And yes, vampires figure prominently once again (although this time around there are zombies as well). In the very first scene you see what happens when vampires figure out how to cure the Crucifix Glitch.