

# Physics and Poetry

## The Complex World of Alan R. Wilson

Alan R. Wilson is the author of two books of poetry—*Animate Objects* (1995) and *Counting to 100* (1996). The New Brunswick-born author lives and works in Victoria, British Columbia, making frequent trips home. Trained in physics and astronomy, Wilson is an analyst and statistician at the University of Victoria. *Before the Flood* (1999), his first novel, is set in the 1960s, in Woodstock, at the juncture of the Meduxnekeag and Saint John Rivers. The novel spans the construction period of the massive Mactaquac Dam which, by the final chapter, has altered forever the free-flowing Saint John River. In the first chapter of the novel, the young narrator, Sam MacFarlane, writes a school essay extolling the project, quoting the glib slogans prominent on town billboards. In the final chapter, Sam—with two of his friends—canoes the river, from Woodstock to Fredericton, the day before the *diversion sluiceway* is permanently sealed. Wilson's idea is that the past is not walled off from the present: the *sluiceway* remains open if we have the wit to find it. *Before the Flood* (co-winner of the *Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award*; reviewed on p. 249 of this issue of *CL*) is the first novel in a projected series. Wilson is at work on the second novel, *The Burning Season*, and he has a third collection of poetry, a book of sonnets, ready for publication. This interview took place in October 1999 in Rothesay, New Brunswick.

AC Alan Wilson, to use the jargon of the sociologist, you are a Maritime out-migrant. Living in Victoria, do you think of yourself as a Maritime writer?

AW Yes I do. I live in B.C. because that's where my job is. I got my physics degree at UNB, and went to B.C. for graduate school. They gave me a

- job and I stayed. I don't like being poor. I tried being poor, and I wasn't very good at it.
- AC Do you think that if you were in the Maritimes, you would be poor?
- AW More likely. Statistically, yes. The job I have at the University of Victoria is a comfortable job, a secure job, and I can do it fairly easily. I have energy left to write after I do the job.
- AC Your poem "Scene with a Shirt" (AO 23) is reminiscent of Alden Nowlan's "Red Wool Shirt," and your carpenter, in the poem of that title (AO 7), reminds me of Milton Acorn's several poems on that figure. Do you see your work as participating in a local tradition that features scenes and characters of Maritime life?
- AW I'd say no to that for the poetry although "Scene with a Shirt" and "Falling Landscape" come directly from Albert County [N.B.]. I have ancestors in Albert County. For those two poems, yes, but, generally, the poetry is less rooted in a particular place than the novel [*Before the Flood*] is.
- AC Economy, precision, and exactitude characterize your work. Do you think that these are bound to be the qualities of a poet who is trained in the sciences?
- AW I'm not sure which comes first—the nature and predisposition to the physical sciences or the precision that follows from that study. I don't think my studies in the physical sciences did that. I think that was already there. I've always had the idea that the literary image and the scientific image are manifestations of the same thing. I never quite managed to separate the two like I was supposed to. I don't see the two as separate [spheres] as others seem to.
- AC The above-named qualities are characteristic of the work of W.W.E. Ross, a Canadian Imagist poet who was trained as a scientist. Would you describe yourself as an Imagist poet?
- AW In these two books [*Animate Objects* and *Counting to 100*], I'd say the words have to do something or they are out of there. There are very few freeloading words. In that sense, I'd say I am [an Imagist].
- AC I am interested in the way in which the narrative drive of myth and the minimalism of Imagism combine in your work in a poem like "Carpenter" (AO 7). Do you think that the minimalist manner underlines the way in which the mysterious inheres in the everyday?
- AW In physics and astronomy, you are looking at reality at a very fundamental and basic level. If you look at anything closely enough, it stops making sense. You start seeing the strangeness, that underlies reality.

Physics, supposedly, is a reductionist method, but it is not. It's just the opposite. You're pushing away all the foliage and you're looking into something very complex and very strange. You're pulling one layer away to find another layer even more complex. There's a pattern there that our minds can't get around. There's a limit to our understanding because there's a limit to our [mental] architecture. Nobody understands quantum physics. Einstein didn't understand it. Our minds are not structured to handle that depth of nature. Where the rational ends, I guess, is where mysticism starts.

- AC You appear to have a strong interest in myth. Characters in your novel *Before the Flood* are aligned through their names (Noah, Arthur, Vergil) with myth, and *Animate Objects* contains the poem "Song of the Magi," which collapses Christian myth and Greek myth ("plains of asphodel") and uses an epigraph from *Gilgamesh*. Why are myths so important to you as a writer?
- AW I do keep going back to the myths. The hockey story in *Before the Flood* [chapter 4] is a variation on that particular poem. Both are the Sumerian underworld. The hockey story is a development of that poem where I go back to the Sumerian pantheon, which I found interesting because it is the first one we know of, pre-Greek, pre-Indian.
- AC The magi ("Song of the Magi" [AO 8-9]) bring gifts to a female immortal. Who is that immortal?
- AW She is the destructive goddess born out of the nuclear holocaust. There is a science fiction aspect to that poem. After the holocaust, there is this mutated creature that is born. That's who she is. It's a black treatment of the Ishtar figure [*Gilgamesh*]. In the poem and in the novel, I draw from the same pool—*Gilgamesh*.
- AC In *Animate Objects*, there are poems about things breaking down ("Equipment Failure," "Falling landscape" [AO 2, 3]). Buildings and equipment are at the mercy of the elements. The world of man-made things is remarkably unstable. Do you find yourself in sympathy with the forces of elemental nature?
- AW "Equipment Failure" is really about our bodies breaking down. The image of man-made things breaking down is a metaphor. Common and everyday things are no longer working: our bodies are no longer working. I have a Luddite streak. The man-made things don't last. The elements keep coming back. So the answer is yes. I don't know if I would use the word "sympathy," but I do have a respect for, a fear of, those elements.

The gale is going to get them anyway, so we might as well vicariously enjoy it.

- AC Your work—novel and poetry—reveals a powerful fascination with order in the universe, yet the author of that order is not a consideration in your work. Is that an accurate observation?
- AW “The Carpenter” is about Christ. And the poem 33 [*Counting to 100*] is about Christ, but I guess such poems are not that common. God is everywhere in the novel, though. *Before the Flood* is set in the New Brunswick Bible Belt, but you’re right. There’s not much of God in the poetry.
- AC In “Hiroshima” (AO 20) you write, “When God was a boy, / he must have pulled wings / off angels.” Is horror in the universe a reflection of a creator?
- AW I wrote that as a teenager. That’s the oldest poem in the book. It’s hardly a poem: more like an aphorism. It’s a young person being angry at what he sees. That’s probably the only poem that suggests God is the author of horror. It’s a “fist in the face” image. It’s one of the early poems that I still like. That’s why it is there.
- AC “He” (AO 10-11) is a comic narrative account of the castration of the pronoun “he”: “man” mauled by “human.” Have the language issues raised by feminists made it more difficult to write poetry?
- AW Feminism has made the pronouns problematical. That poem is kind of an adult version of “Hiroshima,” transplanted to the feminist era. Somebody said to me that “the use of the pronoun ‘he’ is now grammatically incorrect,” and I got the idea for this universal “he” in full flight. The poem is really a bit of a lark. There are several poems, including “Anguished Poet,” that are “larks,” but those can get pretty serious once you start playing with them. I liked the idea of animating the pronoun.
- AC “Anguished Poet Seeks Self in Verse” (AO 12-14) is a witty comment on authorial presence, which seems to send up romantic verse.
- AW That poem is a parody of a certain Canadian poet. I read one of his books—a very prolific poet—and I thought this should never have been published. It was sloppy and maudlin, and there was just not much in it. It made me kind of angry that it was published. So I decided to parody the style of the poet. His poetry was “I’m unhappy and you all should be interested in it.” I found that egocentric and I get impatient with that.
- AC Wary of poetry centred on the self, you’re not the kind of poet who is going to write confessional poetry?

- AW Absolutely not. I'm basically a boring person. I don't consider the way I live to be interesting. I think that I do make connections with things that can be interesting, but there is too much "I" poetry. I wanted to make sure that I didn't slip into it.
- AC Your formal range is impressive, including cinquain, villanelle, haiku, limerick, and so forth. Does a poem's content lead to the choice of a particular form? Or, do you set yourself the task of writing in a particular form?
- AW Mostly the form is first. Once you have the form, certain things are eliminated. The form is a spotlight.
- AC And now there is to be a book of sonnets?
- AW Eighty-eight, the number of constellations. Many of them have been published in journals. Certainly with the sonnets, the form comes first.
- AC There is in your poetry an inclination to catalogue. It is there in "Elemental" (AO 4-6), "Newton's Laws" (AO 39), and in "Twenty-Four Poets' Haiku" (AO 15-18), a catalogue of poetic styles. What is this impetus to catalogue?
- AW That's a major part of what the sciences do—to categorize and catalogue to help people make sense of the world. "Elemental" does reflect reality. Those elements are there in the world. They are not inventions. That particular catalogue is the structure of nature. It was originally intended to be a whole book and then I pulled back. I thought enough is enough.
- AC So the catalogue is a natural form.
- AW And the point about that catalogue, "Elemental," is that you're given the start of the catalogue in the title of the poem. "Newton's Laws" is another example. I thought, I can write poems about these laws. It's my way of defying the separation of poetry and science.
- AC How would you describe the kind of mind that finds poetry in the periodic table?
- AW Obsessive. For a moment I thought unimaginative, but of course that is totally wrong.
- AC In the poem "Moon" (AO 21), philosophers are concerned with the moon as paradox ("lifeless sphere" casting a light "very brilliant, very white"), but the astronomers, interested in the nature of light, and the moon-struck lovers, interested in each other, could care less. What is the poet's attitude toward the moon?
- AW The astronomers and the lovers are the same. The poet is all the above.
- AC In your view, is the poet principally an observer, a recorder, of the world?

- AW That's what I have been. There's "I" poetry that's interesting. I can't do it. Others can. I have to step back.
- AC So observer or recorder would describe your position in the first two books?
- AW Yes, although I'm not exempt from the things that are going on, as in "Equipment Failure," but they are not particular to me as an individual.
- AC You have poems such as "Poets Write Haiku on Office Stationary [sic] . . ." that are about the writing process. How do you experience that process?
- AW The pleasure principle. I enjoy doing it. There are times when things occur to me and to ignore them would be more difficult than to deal with them. Writing poetry is more like the adult equivalent of building a tree fort. It is fun to build these things out of words. Even if it does look serious, it is still fun. And there is a natural urge or inclination to do it.
- AC If "I" is lost and "he" is on the run, is "it" the only stable entity?
- AW One of the underlying ideas of *Animate Objects* is that there is no such thing as "it." We think of this [the water glass] as an "it," a chunk of glass, but the book says that it's an animate object. What pronoun we use doesn't matter because "it" has a kind of strange life of its own. In the normal way we use "it," the word is demeaning because the word suggests the object has no life.
- AC If objects are "animate," what are humans?
- AW We are animate too. In my poetry, I bring objects closer to the living world, so does that mean that humans have to go higher up? In the book, it's very democratic. Humans are interacting with objects.
- AC So it's a community of animate entities?
- AW I don't know if I believe that, but that does seem to be what the book is saying.
- AW Would you say that you are a poet of time rather than of place?
- AW Yes.
- AC Robert Graves said that to write poems for anyone but poets is wasteful. Do you agree with that?
- AW Of course not.
- AC So whom do you write for?
- AW I write for myself, but I would like to think that at least some of the poems, especially *Counting to 100*, show that people don't have to write poetry in order to get something out of these poems. Of course, poetry in this country does seem to be a very closed circle, and it does seem as if a lot of poetry is written for other poets.

- AC “Scene with a Shirt” (AO 23), an edgy, rather unnerving poem, suggests that there is another reality lurking around the edges of physical reality. Isn’t that a blasphemous position for a scientist?
- AW No. Not at all. Lots of scientists believe in God. Science is another way of looking at the world.
- AC “Exercise,” rather similar to “Shirt,” presents the world from a ghost’s perspective. Ghosts, in your work, seem to want to be rid of the clutter of human emotions to simply listen in on the universe (“radio of wind and rain,” “background static of worms”). Is the poet, in some sense, a ghost presence in the world?
- AW I never thought of it that way, but I suppose you’re right. The ghost is a kind of detached observer too.
- AC *Animate Objects* does begin with the poem “Headstone.”
- AW I was doing a flip—having it at the beginning of the book rather than at the end, where it would be in life.
- AC Yours is a precisely observed world with craziness in it. The dead, ancestors, and the proximity of another reality haunt these matter-of-fact poems. Is the universe a place of several kinds of realities?
- AW The universe is far more complex than we can imagine. J.B.S.Haldane, the geneticist, said, “my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.” That’s about capability and about the world. The two don’t exist separately. We’re in the world: the world is bigger than we are, and we can only see bits and pieces of it. So “are there separate realities?” No. There’s only one reality that we can only glimpse at. We can view it, or treat it, as separate realities, but it is probably all one reality.
- AC Your work has been described by reviewers as classicist, but there is also a gothic quality in it. The classicism could be tracked to your training in science, but where does the gothic come from?
- AW Phyllis Webb called me a Formalist. To me gothic means that you’re drilling a little deeper than we normally go. You’re getting into the dark world, the underworld that underpins it all. When we do that—go deeper—things start to look very strange, creepy, kind of scary.
- AC Frequently in a poem there is an unexpected twist. I’m thinking, for example, of “Antiques,” where the daughter’s un-medicated madness allows objects to speak, but the kick is that the sane newspaper-reading father is disturbed by the voices. Do you think of the world as a quirky place?

- AW This poem turns things around and says that maybe she's closer to what's going on than he is because he's hearing some of those things too. There are these voices that she's hearing quite clearly, and he's getting a little bit of.
- AC You write of a world of objects and these are neither silent nor dead. William Carlos Williams' "No ideas but in things" is rendered literally: things, in these poems, have ideas, are communicative. Does your poetry recommend that we tune into a world that we have hitherto been deaf to?
- AW I'm not recommending anything, but the poetry does say that if you look at things a little steadier than we normally do, you'll start seeing them differently. That's how I see the world: it's infinitely strange.
- AC In your poems, the human is very small, indeed, as compared to forces, regular ones like gravity, irregular ones like gales and storms. Is this repositioning of the human a result of your training as a physicist?
- AW Science certainly emphasizes that we are part of the physical world. We're not left out of things, but the physical sciences don't care about people per se. They look at the world independent of human concerns. And the poems do that too. We're not the whole game; we're just part of it.
- AC A sense of menace is never far away in your poetry as, for example, in the poems "Tale" (AO 19) and "Solitary Image" (AO 37). What is the source of this menace?
- AW I find the world scary because we are not as important in it as we would like to think. We are not exempt from those forces. We have few choices. The story has been written for us. The world is scary and the world is uncontrollable. We can admire it, enjoy it, but in the end, we can't control it, except in an illusionary way. In the gothic world, the gothic sensibility, humans are demoted. It's an unreasoning world, in the sense that we think of reason, so we are demoted. I think that is both truer and more interesting than the picture where we are the colossus, the focus of interest.
- AC In "Solitary Image" (AO 37), an urban landscape is the site of something menacing and the poem seems to collapse the urban and a prehistoric fear of the beast. Is the urban as liable to incursions of the beast as the world of *Gilgamesh* (Humbaba) or *Ulysses* (Cyclops)?
- AW Of course. The gothic view of things is that the city is no protection. *It* is still out there even if the immediate things you see are the things that humans have built. It's there underground, in the air, just over the horizon.



AC In “Fascist Haiku” (AO 41-42) an SS officer or some soldier of the holocaust is reminded of a lover by the light of the distant fires. Does the Imagist cleanness of the haiku make it a particularly suitable vehicle for the the brutal tamping down of sympathy that enables this soldier to compartmentalize his feelings?

AW I found the whole concept of a Nazi writing in haiku so incongruous. The reality is that there probably were Nazis who wrote in haiku. Here are two things that you’d think cannot possibly be related, and I found the idea of pulling these two unlikely things—the gentle, subtle haiku and the Nazi fist—together so interesting. If a Nazi wrote haiku, what would they look like? The incongruity, the fact that they did not belong together, appealed to me. I wanted to try putting them on the same plane.

AC Is the Fascist more likely to write in haiku than in another form?

AW No. I would expect a dramatic monologue; a haiku is the last thing I’d expect.

AC Except that the haiku is a form that commands an immense amount of control. Therefore, there is a synchronicity between this man and this form.

AW So what you’re saying is that it’s not an unlikely form? Maybe you’re right. Maybe Fascists wrote haiku rather than anything else.

AC The poems “Hiroshima,” “Fascist Haiku,” and “The Italian Campaign,” with their World War II focus, chronicle acts of cruelty and violence, or impending ones. Is the capacity for acts of horror an innate human capacity?

AW That appears to be the case. Otherwise, we wouldn’t keep going back to it.

AC Windows are everywhere in this poetry (“Weather” [45], “Windows” [50], “Solitary Image” [37]). Why are these so important to you?

AW If our abilities are limited to simply looking at the world through port-holes, where we can only get bits and pieces of the world, then looking through a window is what we do our whole lives. We look through different windows and try to make sense of the world.

AC Is the window a metaphor for poetry writing?

AW It would be a good metaphor for a lot of things, poetry among them. It would be a good metaphor for what scientists do. We’re locked in the house. We can’t get out of the house. There are different ways of looking out. Writing is one of them and so is science. God is one of them.

AC Who are your favourite painters?

AW I like the Impressionists. I also like Victorian painters because they are

unapologetic. I like their lushness. I'm an anachronism so I think that the Victorian stuff goes with that.

I like Renoir for the same reason. He has fun on the canvas. He's unpretentious.

- AC Your second book, *Counting to 100*, is more abstract than your first. Numbers have replaced objects in the title and as a point of focus in the poems. What was your thinking in this move?
- AW The idea was to do something that is not supposed to work because numbers and poetry don't go together. I did the first two or three just as toss-offs. They were discussed in workshop, and Derek Wynand [workshop leader] really liked them and the class didn't. There were complaints—this is not poetry. And of course when they said that, I was determined that I was going to continue with them because I disagreed so strongly and wanted to prove them wrong. Originally, I was just going to write 1 to 10 and then it got out of control.
- AC How easily did these number-poems come to you, and in what order? Did you write 88 before you wrote 8, for example?
- AW There was no sequence at all. When the idea would come, I would sit down and write one of these.
- AC Certain numbers, such as 6 and 8, are body types; others are anorexic (21) or dyslexic (62). For you, do numbers have physical presence and personality?
- AW In that book, the numbers are at varying distances from human beings. Some of the numbers are beings in themselves. They speak and have their properties. They are in their world, but then there are other ones, like the number five, that are not about the number at all. That one is about the five fingers. It's a step closer to us. For some of the number poems, it's the references that I tie in with the number. They are not animate at all. And some of them are their own beings.
- AC Would you consider 6 and 8, the ones with physical bodies, animate?
- AW Absolutely. The poem in each case is about this being, this creature. 30 is not. That's our world. It's not animate. It only exists in relation to our world.
- AC Some of these poems (7, 9, 13) harvest the mythic or folk associations of numbers. Are you saying something about how human-storied numbers are, how often numbers are part of the stories humans tell?
- AW Sure. The book says that. I went on a search mission. I tried to find a reference wherever I could. 86 for instance is the one where the mathematician is in the strip club, and I got that from *Mash*. 86 means "to

eject.” The mathematician is impressed with the numerics of the woman’s body and he ends up getting thrown out on his nose. On one level, *Counting* was a fun Easter egg hunt.

- AC Thinking of the 35 millimetre camera, the 38 pistol, and the 45 record, are numbers, in some sense, as significant as artefacts in being the museum of culture?
- AW Of course. Some of those numbers would not work in a different culture, at a different time, in a different part of the world. Heinz 57 is not going to work in Greek culture.
- AC So this book is like a museum of culture?
- AW Yes, pop culture.
- AC But not just pop culture?
- AW Some go deeper. The 33 is Christ’s age. A lot of them go deeper, yes.
- AC All poetry has a riddling quality, but in the pages of this book, many of these poems are literally riddles. Are you drawing attention to poetry as play, as riddle?
- AW I like books to do that. They are telling a little set of jokes or riddles and some of them you get quickly and some of them you can’t, which makes you want to go back. It’s game-playing. It’s seduction. There are riddles here. That’s what I enjoy doing. A couple of reviewers didn’t like that. They thought it was beneath poetry to be doing that sort of thing.
- AC Some poems are created around a number’s quality—its indivisibility (17) or its perfection (25) or the multiples it contains (24).
- AW Look at this one [34]. It adds up every way. I can’t take credit for that one. It’s called a magic square. To me that was the riddle. It scared people. That is quite gothic, quite weird. That’s what is scary about the world.
- AC It’s a visual experience.
- AW My only concrete poem.
- AC In doing public readings from this book, which numbers do you choose to read?
- AW I tend to pick ones that are quickly accessible. I read 1 and 2 to get started. I read 5. That’s an obvious one. I read 13 because of Wallace Stevens’ poem. I read 20, which is about perfect vision. And then there’s 73, which also has good vision, but realizes that infinity—all those digits—is stretched out across the horizon. That’s kind of a critical poem because of the eerie buzz of infinity. In a way, that is about us: our realization that this world is very small, and that there is more out there. This one is what the book is about.

- AC Has the number book been as successful with readers and reviewers as *Animate Objects*?
- AW To some reviewers it wasn't real poetry because it falls out of their range of experience. But Stephen Scobie gave it probably the best review I'll ever get. He said it was a kind of numeric epic. But some thought a grown man shouldn't be doing this. The book was partly me breaking windows, a natural cussedness.
- AC Did you ever get stuck and say what am I going to do with this number?
- AW You're damn right I did. But it's funny how the gaps would fill up. Near the end, the last handful took a little while.
- AC There are occasions when you don't choose the obvious thing. The alphabet poem is 27, not 26.
- AW Noah's ark is the obvious thing for 40, so it's nice not to do it.
- AC Speaking of the Bible, there's an early scene in *Before the Flood* that I particularly like. Vergil and Sam are in the Baptist church, and three levels of language (Vergil's note to Rachel, the reverend's sermon, and phrases from Sam's essay) get interwoven. Is this interweaving across language levels your notion of how language works?
- AW Not only language, but also life moves across different levels. There are many things occurring at once, and language is a reflection of that. You have these three worlds going on at the same time. There are not three solitudes here. We bounce things off one another.
- AC There's an inner darkness in Reverend Hart that emerges as madness from time to time. Has religion in the Maritimes had a particularly distorting effect?
- AW Woodstock and Carleton County [N.B.] are part of the traditional Bible belt. When I grew up there, went to high school there, the Baptists were still in the Old Testament. They still are to a certain extent. So there was a destructive element to the religion in that area. There was a very positive element as well because there was a focus on things that are not materialistic. So there were these two aspects to it that I find interesting and appealing. There is the side that can destroy weaker people, but there is the side that can make people greater than they are because they don't focus upon the latest sale at the K-Mart. What they see may be distorted, but they are nonetheless looking up. Hart is a tortured man, but he is also a good man. In the last chapter, he's trying to console Miss Jonah because her cats are about to die. That's the other part of his religion: the part that makes him better than he might be otherwise. The

kind of ranting sermon that he gives can be distorting, poisonous, especially for young people although these boys are ignoring him.

- AC Yet, if we can go by Hart's sermon, his is a gorgeous, metaphorical, adjective-rich language. Does religion's bequest include both gorgeous language and guilt?
- AW The sheer richness of Christianity and its length of time, its two thousand years, have left behind quite a rich tradition. It's also given people a lot of time to get all twisted around. This religious base is a form of living history. Biblical language is one of the areas of conflict between the liberal and the conservative branches of Christianity. The liberal branch wants to translate it right into modern vernacular English, and the conservatives want to hold onto the older stuff. I think I am probably on the conservative side.
- AC The flood will drown Island Park, the Intervale, and the Nighthawk Cafe. Sam says that "people are always laying waste to their own history." Is *Before the Flood* an expression of cultural ecology?
- AW Yes, and pure environmentalism as well. It's definitely about preserving what we should preserve rather than what we do preserve. On the whole, I look back at that time with fondness. It was a rich place for a teen-ager. It is, in a way, a love letter, a salute, to a place that gave me a lot when I was growing up there. I hate to see towns razing their own pasts. They don't realize how valuable the past is, how unique it is. I didn't want to get didactic in the book, but it is clear where I stand on it.
- AC The monstrous in this novel includes Brainiac, Frankenstein, and the dam. Why is the dam placed in this category of allusions?
- AW The dam is a man-made creation that wreaks havoc.
- AC Noah Perley is always in sight on the river, but never present in anyone's company, and unlike his namesake, he drowns when the river drowns. Does this say that the dam is not an ark, and that we're lost for sure this time?
- AW The dam is, as far as semi-mythical time goes, the end of the world. The world is over. On the other side of the dam, there is something else, but it is not this world any more. I am not even saying the next is a worse world, but that's why the book I'm writing now is not a sequel. It comes before this world [*Before the Flood*] because this world is finished. The building of the dam is the border for this particular world, and the boys live through that border period. In the next novel, the ghosts [in *Flood*] are all characters.

- AC What is the connection between the hole in the window of the burning school and the fact that Noah's canoe looks like an orange hole in the Saint John River?
- AW That was intentional. The hole in the burning window is another appearance of the canoe. There is this picture from the past that keeps appearing and the burning window is just another place where it appears. It's another ending of the world—in flames. Flood and flames.
- AC Arthur Netherwood, Sam's friend, barely distinguishes the Woodstock landscape (the island at the juncture of the rivers) from a similar Mesopotamian geography that he has read about in *Gilgamesh*. Are you making a point about the interchangeability of archetypes here?
- AW Arthur is a very young fellow, a very imaginative fellow, and he looks at this town, because he is so young, as new to him. And he connects it with Mesopotamia. He goes back and forth [between his imagination and the real world]. He switches them very easily. You don't have to go to Paris to write exotic books. You just have to look at where you are.
- AC This novel says that time is not what we think it is. It is not linear. Tell me about your conception of time.
- AW In the novel, the past and present are beginning to co-exist, and people get confused. The past keeps sticking up into the present, which is just a slight embellishment of what happens anyway. These ghostly figures are real people who are lingering. The past and the present are getting jumbled up.
- AC An intermittent condition for Sam is feeling strange in the familiar. Local places seem suddenly to have an unreal air, and he himself feels alien in the community. Is the ordinary saturated with the extraordinary?
- AW The present being saturated by the past would be a subset of that. The ordinary is not ordinary, and one of the reasons why it is not is because of the past. As a kid, have you not focused on something that is very familiar so that it suddenly starts to get very strange? We get busy as adults. We get used to things. As a kid, you are new in the world. What adults just walk by, kids look at.
- AC So that to describe this book as just a boy's book trivializes that?
- AW When someone says that, all they are saying is that a boy is an undeveloped adult. The book takes the opposite stance.
- AC "The wonder of physics lay in its power to equate things that on the surface appeared unrelated": Are you talking about physicists or poets?
- AW Both.

- AC Sam's physics teacher, as well as Sam himself, is interested in occasions when there is a violation of physical laws. Is this what interests you about the physical universe?
- AW Yes. My high school physics teacher was the most influential teacher that I had. He was like that, and the character in the book gets some of that.
- AC In investigating the incandescence on the Intervale, Sam tries to purge superstition (will-o-the-wisp) with science. He isn't altogether successful, is he?
- AW No, he's not, not at all.
- AC In *Before the Flood*, Arthur, the child poet, keeps Sam, the rationalist scientist, from denying the mystery of the universe.
- AW Arthur is younger. He hasn't lost as much, and he pulls Sam back a bit.
- AC Together they make the whole child. Sam seems to be positioned between Arthur, the poet, and Andrew, who is sceptical, but after a while the reader begins to see that Andrew Watson is also a poet *and* a rationalist.
- AW Yes, and I'd add even Vergil to that because he is without fear and so has a gothic sensibility, which makes Sam less afraid of it. Vergil is actually fairly important.
- AC Sam finds the book on astronomy, *The Heavens*, in the religions section of the library. What's your point here?
- AW It wasn't mis-filed. It is exactly where it is supposed to be.
- AC In the very accurate descriptions in your poetry, you often suggest that there is more present than what is available to sight. Peripheral vision, night vision, and seeing into shadows are attributes of some characters in *Before the Flood*. What's the difference between sight and vision?
- AW Sight is what we see with our optic nerves, and vision is all the rest of it.
- AC And vision is uppermost in *Before the Flood*?
- AW Yes, I think so. Vision is the sight of what others have seen in the past, or what Reverend Hart sees. All of that goes into the experience of what these characters, Sam included, go through. There are bits of the past that become visible. Those things are crossing the border into sight.
- AC When you are a child, vision and sight are not separated. Is that so?
- AW The demarcation [between sight and vision] appears to be more abrupt when we are older for whatever reason. Although there are situations in times of stress when adults may see things.
- AC Does maturity put out our eyes?
- AW That's one of the ideas of the book. Maturity is parallel to progress,

which is made fun of in the book. We are going from place A to place B, and will end up in a different place, not necessarily a better place or a more complete place. Going from childhood to adulthood is going to a different place. Adulthood is not the fulfilment of the child.

- AC *Before the Flood* is a novel of beautifully conceived parallels: Tennyson's poem "Crossing the Bar" and the sandy bar of the Intervale; the pattern of fire hydrants on the ground and the pattern of stars in the sky. Is this parallelism a device of narrative structure or is the world for you full of uncanny parallels?
- AW The latter. In the hydrant story, Sam soon forgets about the telescope that he wants because the universe has come down to earth. There he is on the hill looking down. The effect is as if he were looking up. He is looking at this town and that's one of the things a small town is—a complete universe. He's looking at the town, and it is the sky. So what has happened, especially in that chapter, is that he has taken a big step in his appreciation of his immediate world. Seeing the earthbound constellations brings that about.
- AC The shudder in this novel is not ghosts but old age. Silas Templeman is a grim and sad figure of old age. Is Silas more of a horror than the dead?
- AW Yes, because he is partly dead already. He is a kind of living dead.
- AC Is old age a horror for you?
- AW It's one of my personal neuroses. I don't like the apparent uni-direction of time.
- AC Do either of the forthcoming novels in the projected series have an aged narrator or protagonist?
- AW The next novel is in third-person. There will be two main characters: the supposed great-grandfather of Sam and Uriah Hanson, the sheriff of the town. The two main characters are not old-age characters.
- AC When Sam is painting the fire hydrants, he meets an old man. I presume that the next novel will speak of the fires to which the old man refers. Is the trilogy named for the elements and if so, what is the element in the third piece of the trilogy?
- AW The third one will be air or earth, one or the other.
- AC Why isn't this a quartet? Where is the fourth book? You're planning a trilogy, aren't you?
- AW No. Several people have called it a trilogy. Nowhere have I ever used the word "trilogy." I'm not hemming myself in with this. I don't know how many books there will be. It depends if I continue to have a good time



writing them. The next book takes place in 1881. It basically covers April to December of that year. When I revised *Before the Flood*, I put a lot of things in because by then I knew exactly what I was going to do in the book. I had this invisible book underneath the present book. Writing a sequel would be easier. The “prequel” will be a little trickier. So planting those seeds in *Flood* seemed a way to link the two more closely despite the fact they are eighty years apart.

AC Is *Burning Season* written?

AW Partly. I know what I’m doing with *Burning Season*, which may mean it’s not as good. I didn’t know what I was doing with *Before the Flood*. It evolved. Some people question if it’s a novel, but I think those are straw arguments.

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