

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: WRITING THE FUTURE STORY PEOPLE WANT

LAURA FLANDERS: If 20 million people in India died in a heat wave today, would that be enough to make humanity take action? That's the question posed by Kim Stanley Robinson in his 2020 best selling novel, "The Ministry For The Future." A book that's been praised by everyone from Barack Obama, to the Dalai Lama and seems to be turning even bankers and bureaucrats' heads. The book opens with Indians dying in their millions in wet bulb temperatures that send people cramming into lakes to cool off, where they poach to death. The threshold he sets there for mass death was almost not quite matched this year when Delhi hit 139 degrees Fahrenheit in March. Call it speculative fiction, sci-fi, even cli-fi. Kim Stanley Robinson's writing pushes us to think not just about how close to the end we might be, but how civilization could change not only to survive, but to do better than that, to make life better for everyone on this planet. Kim Stanley Robinson is a New York Times best selling author and winner of the Hugo, Nebula and Locus awards. He is the author of more than 20 books, including the "Mars Trilogy," "Aurora," "New York 2140" and his most recent, "The High Sierra: A Love Story," published this spring. He was invited to speak at the United Nations Climate Summit last fall, where he was reportedly treated as quite a celebrity. In 2008, he was named a Hero of the Environment by Time Magazine. He works with Sierra Nevada Research Institute and lives in Davis, California, and he likes to be called Stan. So welcome, Stan, glad to have you.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: Happy to be here and happy to be with you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let's start with those wet bulb temperatures. It was a new phrase, new term to me, what does it mean?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: It's a heat index, it's a combination of heat and humidity. Human body is really quite good in dry heat. We evolved to sustain certain high temperatures, but when it's humid, the body doesn't work as well to shed that heat, sweat doesn't effectively cool you, you go into a hyperthermia rather than hypothermia and it doesn't take much of that to kill a human, just a few hours of a wet bulb 35 temperature is enough to shut down essential systems in the body and kill you. This was news to me and the scientific and medical community had sort of combined their findings. And it was about 2016, 2017 when they began to tell the world in a public way, there's an upper limit to what we can adapt to as human beings on this planet. And wet bulb 35 was the number they chose as being fatal. And I thought to myself, "I have to write this."

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, your opening scene is horrific and chilling. Are we close? How close are we to that point?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: With climate change, with global warming, there are going to be more and more incidences of it. And I want to note that one of the highest wet bulb temperatures ever was recorded in the '90s outside of Chicago, Illinois. So this is a problem that hits places like the American Midwest, the American Southeast. Warm humid places, all around the world, they're all in danger.

LAURA FLANDERS: Your book is full of literally, I mean, almost literally 106 possible solutions, not just scientific, but also economic, geopolitical, even spiritual, but the financial is central. Can you talk about why that is and what's the strategy?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: My feeling when I wrote the book is all of that work has to be paid for. In other words, people need to devote their careers to it, and they need to make a living from it and not be doing it on the side or suffering a financial cost for doing it. So there are two basic notions to this, that the central banks create new money in a process called quantitative easing. We saw it in 2008, we saw it in 2020 with the pandemic. This would be green quantitative easing that the original source of the money from the central banks would be spent first on good biosphere work, and then go out into the general economy and hopefully have a multiplier effect. The other one is even more direct, a so-called carbon coin. If you draw down a ton of CO₂ from the atmosphere, you get paid a carbon coin, it's worth more than spent to draw that carbon down because the central banks are backing it. And therefore you can make money by drawing down CO₂ in any way you see fit that you're capable of. And this would go from individuals, through towns, all the way up to nation states. These are the ideas of economists who are worrying about biosphere health.

LAURA FLANDERS: As you point out Stan, this doesn't always go down so very easily. The bankers think it's not their job to save the planet. Is it?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: Well, no, their job is to stabilize money, which everybody regards as being crucially important. And indeed the more you think about money, the weirder it is. And trust in money is fundamental for society working. So that's their job, they work on that super intensively. In the book, my Mary Murphy points out that if the biosphere is destroyed, then that's bad for money. So that as a larger purview to protect the value of money itself, the bankers have to think about biosphere health, which underlays money as an ultimate point, ultimate guarantee, whatever. If they take their job seriously enough, they have to green money.

LAURA FLANDERS: You can either make some money, you say, but it's not clear who you would get the pay from, or you could save civilization.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: Yes, no one there to pay you if civilization crashes. So as part of keeping money stable, you have to save civilization, it's as simple as that.

LAURA FLANDERS: We also have to talk in real language and you're very skewering that bankers speak and bureaucratese and the language of some economists and business schools. Could you talk about that? Because I think it's part of what makes fiction writing so much more effective in a way than any number of economic papers we could publish.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: I'm super interested in language. Bureaucratic language, it can be very funny, scientific language, it's ludicrous the amount of detail, you could call it jargon. But also they're trying to describe new things by inventing new words. Now, economics does have a problem of masking suffering and also protecting the rich. Take the phrase, wage pressure. Well, if people are scared, they'll take any job they can get, so you want them scared. So wage pressure is a bland economic term that means keeping the precariat frightened, and then they'll take the lowest wage that they can just to stay alive. So it's a rather ugly blackmail or forced gangster-ish pressure we're talking about here, but in the economics books, in the business schools, wage pressure, it's a good thing. The profit line has helped and you mask what you're really doing there.

LAURA FLANDERS: A lot of journalism schools teach a cool objectivity that personally, I think takes all the passion out of their work. My job seems to me is to put it all back. So we try to do that. In your book, in "Ministry For The Future," it has to be said you also have a guerrilla force, Children of Kali who bomb cargo planes out of the sky and take Davos attendees hostage. There was a book published, not so long ago, about how to blow up a pipeline from Verso Press, a sort of meditation on the role of that kind of direct action. Where do you stand on it?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: He makes a distinction that is super important here, between damaging property and harming people or murdering people. So there's a difference between sabotage and murder, a moral difference. And I think Malm also might agree that murder is always bad, that there will be people angry enough if their village all dies, if their family dies before their eyes, they might want revenge. There might be intense anger in this coming century from the weak against the powerful for the damage of climate change. And I wrote about that. And my novel is as messy as history itself in terms of blurring these distinctions. But Malm was a philosopher and political scientist, and he makes a distinction, I think is super important. Could your ordinary citizen countenance or even do acts of damage against property? Is that even violence? Isn't violence always person on person and always wrong? So this is what I've been trying to say since my book came out, my book is a mess, it's not a guidebook, it's a novel. For a guidebook, we've got some pretty good thinkers, including Bill McKibben who would say "peaceful resistance is the most effective political tool". Also, "Why Does Civil Resistance

Work" by Erica Chenoweth. She would be a good person to talk to on these issues as well, that peaceful civil disobedience actually makes more political progress than violence and terrorism. And she can point to the historical record to show that that's not just a hope, that's actually a historical fact. So this is what I've been trying to say. And I would just say my Ministry is not a plan book, it is a science fiction novel.

LAURA FLANDERS:- Indigenous leaders, of course, have been saying the same thing for centuries, for sure. But most recently we saw in Standing Rock and all across this country these days a noble resistance for the generations to come on the part of planet defenders, as they call themselves, water defenders. And we've spoken to a lot of them on this program. You can see where the frustration comes from obviously. And I think a lot of us have felt it keenly given the sequence of events we've lived through over the last decade plus, from the financial crisis, which showed us, wow, the banking system really can just reinvent itself whenever it feels like for its own sake, to the COVID pandemic, where we realized, hmm, public healthcare system sure would be a good idea, to right now, the war in Ukraine at the same time as climate crisis, where you might have hoped that somebody would come forward and say, "You know what? Gas prices are high and they're gonna stay that way and that's actually right. And we're gonna put online a whole lot of transitional fuels and investments to make the difference this civilization's gonna need, if we're gonna survive." Have you heard that happening?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: I would say that we're hearing everything all at once. We're in an echo chamber of every possible view on these issues, such that it's a cacophony and it's easy to think it's just chaos right now. We don't have any coherent civilization. But imagine that that's like the chop on top of the water and underneath it there are strong currents going in certain directions. And the cross chop on the surface is not indicative of where the current is going. Science is still working. The response to the pandemic as a scientific achievement was not only amazing, but it is also a teaching moment. We can do these kinds of things, even with resistance, cross chop, people yammering on at all possible registers and ways, that'll never go away because of social media, but one can still see the currents, currents of capital, current of political thinking, voters, et cetera. You can see movements that actually have a direction towards, we need to do this for our children. We could get through this without a mass extinction event. And therefore we should get through it as an obligation. What I'm seeing is people responding to my novel, which is just a story because they want that story. The particulars of my novel don't matter, it's got, I mean, the 106 chapters, I'd throw out three or four, I'd add five or six. It was an act from 2019, a darker time than now because the pandemic hadn't slapped us in the face, because Trump was still President, etc. What I'm seeing now is that the 2020s will be a time of intense action and it will mean intense conflict, but good things can come of it. Some good things have happened recently.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let's talk about some of those and the Biden plan. He has done all of the many choppy things that you've described. On the one hand, reinvesting some in gas and fossil fuels to bring prices down, dealing with the political. On the other hand, trying to invest, bigger investment than we've seen in transition fuels and alternative fuels and investments. What kind of grade would you give him? And you do sound cheerier than you were when you wrote this book.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: Well, I'd give him an A for effort, but you need a working political majority to get what you want. I think when he came in, he decided he was going to be FDR, do his best to be like FDR, why not? He's old, it's the end of his career, he's President. Why would you try for anything less? Why be a cautious moderate as he had been his whole career when he is at the end of his career and he's President. He went for it, but he can't do everything. And he had a very slim majorities. And so it looked bad, it looked bad for quite a while, as they patiently worked at it. But he hired an excellent team. These are young, idealistic, super smart operatives in Washington, DC who were hired to important positions. Everybody I've met in the Biden administration has been pretty impressive and they're all working on this. Well, it was all gonna fail anyway, 'cause it's a balance of powers in our government, but that Biden bill that passed, it was only, what would you say? Maybe a quarter of the size of originally proposed, it's still massive, it's still bridging the energy transition with government funds so that private companies can get past the pilot stage and into production and scale. And that's precisely where everyone needs government help to bridge that gap, the valley of death, as they call it in the investment community. It's so much money that they have to be careful as in the New Deal to spend it smart if they can and to get it out there fast. So for actual achievements, I'd give them an A minus, for aspiration, I'd give them an A plus. Now, and I must say I've been always at the far progressive end of the Democratic Party. I figure a third party in America just crashes the party closest to your side. But what you need to do is to take the party you believe in and pull it as far towards the progressive end as you can without detaching. And so that's my point of view on it. And without wanting to be any kind of a cheerleader or rah rah person, I'd still say you gotta back the Biden effort and acknowledge they've managed to pull off something quite huge.

LAURA FLANDERS: You certainly have seen things emerge in reality that weren't around when you wrote the book or maybe you've discovered things that weren't around when you wrote the book. And you're very humble, I don't think you'd say they wrote the book and did the thing. But are there examples where what you thought was fiction turned out to be fact?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: Yes, there are. And I think of myself as a reporter. I'm a novelist that tries to take stories out of the real world and braid them into a larger story. I didn't know there was a network for greening the financial system and the central banks were always working on this. I didn't know there were think tanks inside the Pentagon who were working hard to think if national defense is their priority, biosphere defense for the whole globe might also be part of

US national defense, I didn't know that. The world's too big for us to keep track of everything. And so it's been an onslaught of information, overwhelming, I would say since the book came out and most of what I've learned has been encouraging, and I don't wanna sound Pollyanna-ish here. It's gonna be a wicked political battle to make it happen. There are entrenched forces that somehow are not convinced. And I think maybe they will never admit that they're convinced, but they might return to the good side anyway out of necessity.

LAURA FLANDERS: The thing that you say about writing fiction, and I read this somewhere, the utopian novel has to walk a narrow tightrope between plausibility and the reality principle, but also project out a positive future that you can believe in. And you do that with these gorgeous descriptions of where we might go. You're describing what's happened when the Golden State, when California has finally come to grips with droughts and floods. Now the necessity of dealing with droughts and floods meant that big areas of the valley were restored, and the animals brought back in a system of wilderness, parks or habitat corridors, all running up into the foothills that ring the Central Valley on all sides. These hills had always been wider than the flat valley floor, and now they are being returned to native oak forests, which provided more shelter for wild creatures. Salmon runs had been established. Tule marshes filled the old dry lake beds. You go on and on, it's gorgeous. And you paint this pitch that just lifts the heart. And I guess it prompts the question. Well, A, what do you think moves people more, love or fear? And B, why fiction and why speculative fiction? And then of course, there's your new book, which isn't that at all, it's sort of memoir, autobiography. And as you say, "The High Sierra: A Love Story."

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: I love California, I'm a Californian and it has enormous problems like the rest of the world, and climate change is hammering it even now as I speak, an intense heat wave and that'll happen more and more. But politically, it's been ahead of the curve, a very progressive place, multicultural, multilingual, and passing legislation that is making water a commons, the SIGMA, Sustained Integrated Groundwater Management Act, SIGMA, super important for dealing with the water problems that will haunt California for the rest of our lifetimes and maybe a few centuries to come. It's all encouraging the California scene, but it's also in incredible danger. And it has the inequality of the rest of the capitalist world as intense as anywhere, extreme richness, extreme poverty. So it's by no means a utopia yet, but its natural landscape is so gorgeous. The High Sierras are a treasure that I love extremely and go up as often as I can. And I live in the valley floor, which is industrial agriculture, it needs to be greened. Regenerative agriculture is a big part of the carbon solution of the climate solution and the Central Valley isn't even close to that right now. It treated the valley floor as if it was a factory floor and it's ugly right now.

LAURA FLANDERS: I feel that your writing is as much trying to touch our hearts about what could be as it is to touch our brains about what the heck is.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: Novels are about feelings, but feelings are highly cognitive and the two come together. And by God, fear is a powerful feeling and we all have it and it distorts everything. But it also drives actions that can be survival oriented. If you fear for your children, your grandchildren, if you fear for the wild animals that are our cousins, the other mammals, then that fear can drive good action or it can cause a panic or it can cause xenophobia, which fear turns into hatred and then you're scared of the other, any other. So all these emotions have a good and a bad side, although you could make a special case for love. If you love something, it means a lot. It is again, a form of religion, a spiritual response. And it's obvious that we evolved with a lot of that going on. We're social primates, we cooperate, the world wouldn't exist without cooperation and altruism. So these are versions of love.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm gonna close as I do often on this program by asking you what you think the story will be, that the future tells of this moment.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: Oh my Lord. Oh, well, they could look back on us and say those fools. How could they be that irresponsible? Think about the French aristocracy before the French Revolution, tripping around in their dresses and their cakes at Versailles, and meanwhile, people are starving elsewhere in the country. Our generation, especially the prosperous developed west, the global north, the rich countries, the countries that were often colonial powers, in those countries we have obligations. We need to do certain things to not be judged by the generations to come. And we are so judgmental of the recent past, of people in the 19th century, "Oh, they were so bad. They did this, they did that." We are so judgmental. This I think is a transference we feel we're going to be judged like that also. And we'd rather not face up to that. But I think it's a good exercise. Oh my gosh, we're going to be judged by people from the future, let's try to do the right things.

LAURA FLANDERS: Kim Stanley Robinson, author of "The Ministry For The Future," and most recently "The High Sierra: A Love Story." Thanks so much for being with us, it's been a pleasure.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: I've had a lovely time, and it's been interesting to talk about these things.

LAURA FLANDERS: I had the pleasure of going to Alaska this summer, where I met naturalist, Mary Lou. She introduced visitors to the wilderness in the Southeast part of that state and urged us to go home and not just say we had a great trip, but use the word, "Keep the word wilderness in your conversation," she said, and it'll stay in your consciousness. And it has a chance then of staying in our culture too. Kim Stanley Robinson imagines a Ministry for the Future that requires governments and organizations and businesses to operate with the future as a reality in mind. You would think having kids would do enough to make us think of our

connections to what comes after us, but doesn't seem to. Kim Stanley Robinson has an interest in Buddhism. Buddhism, he says, not only teaches about impermanence and change, but also through the idea of karma, connects us into individually to the past and the future, and encourages us to feel responsible to both. You can find more of my conversation with Kim Stanley Robinson about Buddhism and carbon coins and his first nonfiction book, a kind of memoir. And keep a lookout for my conversations with Bill McKibben, environmentalist and co-founder of 350.org, a big admirer of Kim Stanley Robinson, it's mutual. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura, and thanks for joining us. For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all lauraflanders.org.