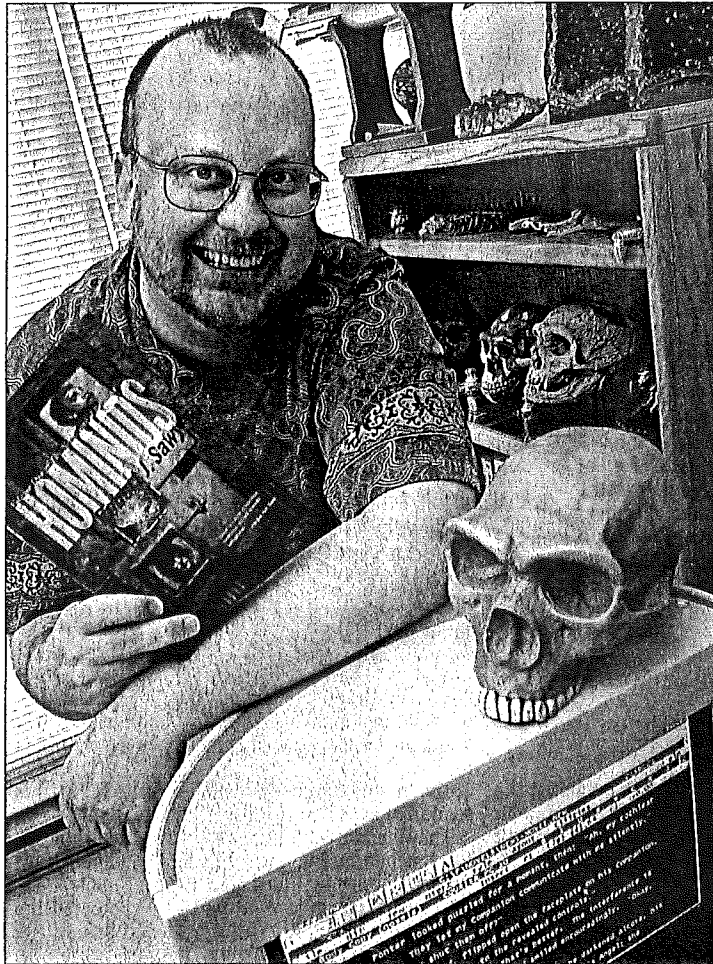


Sci-fi writer down to earth about trilogy

By JOSEPH CHIN
Special

Peel Bio. g.
Aug. 7/02
MN



Robert J. Sawyer is shown with a copy of *Hominids*, the first volume in a trilogy from the Mississauga sci-fi writer.

Robert J. Sawyer is determined to help drag science fiction into the literary mainstream — even if once there he'll be a stranger in a strange land.

So far, he's well on his way to pulling it off.

Sawyer's 2000 novel *Calculating God* appeared on many fiction bestsellers lists, alongside pop stalwarts like John Grisham, Danielle Steel and Mary Higgins Clark. Rarified territory indeed.

Now his latest novel *Hominids* (Tor Books) is already a Canadian national bestseller, a scant few months after its May release.

"I write science fiction, which I'm very happy doing, but my goal is to reach all readers," said Sawyer, taking a respite at his Mississauga condo before embarking on another promotional tour.

A mere dozen years into his career, Sawyer, 42, is having lots of fun bucking conventional publishing wisdom. For one thing, unlike many before him, he refuses to hightail it to the US now that he's successful.

For another, Sawyer actually goes out of his way to use Canadian settings, characters, and allusions in his novels.

"There's absolutely no reason to be ashamed of being Canadian," said Sawyer. "Canada's one of the best countries in the world, and this comes out in my books."

Hominids is the first volume in the Neanderthal Parallax trilogy, which deals with contact between parallel Earths, one in which Homo sapiens became the technological race, and another in which Homo Neanderthalensis did.

The second volume, *Humans*, which

Sawyer has already completed, will be published next February, and the conclusion, *Hybrids*, later that year.

Hominids begins with a bold premise: 40,000 years ago, when two kinds of humanity existed side by side — the Cro-Magnons (our ancestors) and the Neanderthals — the universe split into two timetracks. In one, the Cro-Magnons rose to prominence, extinguishing our Neanderthal cousins in the process. In the other, Neanderthals survived to the present day, developing their own technology and culture, and we did not.

Hominids begins with the opening of a portal between the two versions of reality at the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, a real installation located two kilometers down in an Inco nickel mine. And through the course of the adventures — and the growing romance between York University geneticist Mary Vaughan and Ponter Boddit, a Neanderthal displaced from his world to ours, we learn about the many ways humanity's stewardship over this planet could have gone differently.

"For instance, we have an ever-growing population," Sawyer said, "whereas the Neanderthals found a way to achieve zero-population growth."

To do his research Sawyer, 42, traveled extensively, visiting paleoanthropological experts at Brown University, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Smithsonian.

It's this meticulousness about his data that has helped make Sawyer the only writer to win the top sci-fi awards in the US, France, Spain and Japan. His *The Terminal Experiment* won the Nebula Award — sci-fi's "Academy Award" — for 1995. He's also a six-time Hugo Award nominee.