

## **Q & A for *Universus Respondet: Fermi's Paradox Answered—a Novel***

1. What brought you to write *Universus Respondet*?
  - a. It was a culmination of thoughts that had been building in my head since *Contact* starring Jodie Foster and Matthew McConaughey came out in 1997. First was that “awful waste of space” idea, that there is an enormous amount of universe for the only intelligent life to be on this planet. Second was related to that, Fermi’s “paradox” or the *silentium universi*: the silence of the universe. This is the idea that even if intelligent life is rare, the probability is that Earth should have had at least one if not many encounters with extraterrestrials by now, yet we have no evidence that it has happened. There are lots of potential reasons for that, including the idea that we *are* it—but, again, that would seem like an awful waste of space. Aside from that, one idea that seems very plausible to me is the idea that any species which develops the capability of even just interplanetary space flight within their own star system probably doesn’t communicate in a broadcast way for long. That is, 360°, broadcast radio frequency communication methods are quickly supplanted by point-to-point communication. Basically, the difference between using AM and shortwave in the 1940s versus coaxial cable and laser communications in the 2010s. With coax, there’s very little leaking RF—and, therefore, very little detectable signal past a few millimeters unless you’re connected to the end of the cable. With laser, there’s virtually no leakage. In both cases, unless you’re directly connected to one or the other end, it’s pretty difficult to arbitrarily come across the transmitted communication. So, I thought about some ways that it might be possible to communicate point-to-point over very long distances—interstellar distances—and decided on the one in the novel, which answered the question of why humans hadn’t detected any extraterrestrials before.

2. Why spend years of your life writing it?
  - a. Partly because it took that long to get around to it! After going back and forth on the basic concept, I started writing it as a novel and then decided I didn't have enough material for that, and settled on a short story. I wrote that story fully intending to submit it for some Sci-Fi short story competitions, but realized the story was incomplete. Finally, for NaNoWriMo in 2015, I sat down with it and cranked out about 53,000 more words, creating the base of the novel that I eventually published.
3. What are you trying to achieve with it?
  - a. My number one goal was to craft a story that was as scientifically plausible as I could make it, while still being science fiction—hard science fiction, and the harder the better, but not necessarily 100% feasible without some understanding of physics that may so far elude human knowledge. Since I am *not* a physicist, I am reasonably sure that I got some of it wrong, but I did my best to research what I came up with and tried to keep it as near to feasibility as I could.
4. What got left out in the final draft?
  - a. There were several subchapters of spaceflight that got left out, as well as some redundant sections I wrote during NaNoWriMo.
5. What's next for you? What are you working on now?
  - a. I am presently working primarily on two projects. One is also a Sci-Fi story, working title of *Red Zone Human*, a novel set about 300 years into the future of Earth but is not a successor/sequel to *Universus Respondet*, at least not directly. In that story, Americans have elected AI representatives to many positions in both Federal and lower-level governments, and over time the humans in North America have migrated into a system reminiscent of *The Republic* of Plato. There are three stratifications of humans based on their role in the society. Each strata lives in designated zones for their strata only, but two of the three work together in mixed zones. The lowest level, Blue Zone Humans, are more focused on manual

work, while the Yellow Zone Humans are more focused on intellectual and creative type pursuits. Blue and Yellow Zone Humans live in their strata-segregated Zones, but travel to work in Green Zones for various companies and such. Red Zone Humans are a combination of law enforcement and military, and they both guard the nation as well do routine law enforcement, such as monitoring the travel routes to and from Green Zones. There are also Black Zones, which are key infrastructure areas for the various AIs, including datacenters and power generation and distribution areas. As the story opens, the protagonist witnesses an orbitally-launched rocket attack on nearby Yellow and Blue Zone areas, and becomes part of an investigation into how the attack happened.

6. Why did you choose the title *Univus Respondet*?
  - a. I actually didn't quite choose it! To me, what happens in the story is that—among other things—the universe responds to Fermi's famous "where is everybody?" question. In response to the *silentium universi*, *univus respondet*: the universe responds. I initially tried to figure out the Latin myself, and eventually sought help when I drove myself crazy trying to learn Latin noun declension and verb conjugations.
7. Have you ever turned a dream or nightmare into a written piece?
  - a. In fact, *Red Zone Human* came out of a dream! I woke up from a dream where I was sitting in a barracks room, cold concrete floors, walls, and ceiling, obviously some kind of soldier in dreamland. One of my compatriots in the building was looking out of a window and saw rocket contrails streaking from what appeared to be very high in the atmosphere—possibly from orbiting satellites—which impacted in an area several dozen miles away. At that point I woke up, but the dream stuck with me and I wrote down what I could remember, and that became the starting point for the plot of *Red Zone Human*.
8. What real-life science (or pseudo-science) did you research for your book?

- a. I did a fair amount of research on wormholes and on entangled particles, both of which play critical roles in the story.
9. Do you read your book reviews? How do you deal with bad or good ones?
- a. I definitely read them. I had replied to one (positive) review on *With It or in It*, but realized that it's really just not a good forum for that and removed my reply. The reviews — good and bad — are an individual reader's perception and perspective on the work, and there's really no good reason for *me* to respond even to positive feedback. Negative feedback is for other potential readers, and if a negative review is factually incorrect — say, a reader leaving feedback that they were angry about the treatment of an animal in the story, when there are no animals mentioned at all — that's really something that it is more appropriate for other readers to respond to. Personal attacks, of course, are usually a violation of the terms of service of a site and I will refer those to the site themselves, but there really isn't any good reason for me to reply to any review.
10. Do you try more to be original or to deliver to readers what they want?
- a. Well, I'm kind of in the middle there. If I want a lot of people to read my story, it needs to have something that will appeal to a lot of people. To *whom* it needs to appeal will affect what things are important. For many people who read fantasy, for example, rich worldbuilding can be crucial, so they are often readers more forgiving of background and exposition. I do, however, desire to be original and creative, but that also kind of falls into what readers want. Readers who have read *Dune* or *Neuromancer* don't want to read another *Dune* or *Neuromancer*. They've read those stories. They want something original, creative.
11. Do you read and reply to the comments of your readers?
- a. When those comments come in an interactive forum designed for it, I sometimes will. Comments left on my blog, for example, I will usually answer those. Another example would be Goodreads Q&A sessions, for example. As I noted earlier, I don't see any good reason for me to respond

to reviews, but when a reader or fan posts comments in a public forum designed for interaction, I might respond.

12. What was the hardest part of writing this book?

- a. Finally deciding to go ahead and publish it. There were several things I waffled on including – some of which were those scenes I mentioned earlier, in-flight interactions between characters – and ultimately decided that if I wasn't sure about them, I should leave them out.

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