

# Islam rules

Novel asks: What if Muslims, Buddhists ran the world?

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**B**est-selling author Kim Stanley Robinson has made his name on critically acclaimed science-fiction novels that chart our possible futures.

But Robinson's new book, "The Years of Rice and Salt," makes its mark by reimagining our past.

Robinson wonders, what if the Black Plague had wiped out all of Europe's population instead of just one-third?

His book tackles the last 700 years from that starting point, with, for example, Buddhism and Islam vying for world domination and Christianity just a footnote, and the Chinese "discovering" the New World by landing on the West Coast and unintentionally giving Native Americans a chance to resist the invaders and grow into a world power.

It's an alternate history — one of a growing number of books like "Fatherland" by Robert Harris ("What if the Nazis had

won?") that rewrite the past.

And it's probably the only genre with even less critical respect than science fiction.

"I suppose that's true," laughed Robinson, who turns 50 on March 23. "I've had the idea for a really long time, maybe 20 or 25 years. It was really an excuse to buy anything I wanted in used bookstores."

Critical acclaim has never been a problem for Robinson, who lives in Davis, Calif., with his wife and two sons. He first made his mark with the "California Trilogy,"

three books that contemplated three futures for Orange County, based on possible trends.

Some tremendous reviews also greeted his recent book "Antarctica" (written partly so Robinson could have an excuse to visit that continent) and his short-story collection, "The Martians."

But Robinson's reputation was cemented with



Writing "The Years of Rice and Salt" forced author Kim Stanley Robinson to look beyond Western beliefs and "express other people's points of views."

William McLeod

the "Mars Trilogy," a brilliant look at the colonization of Mars that combined a terrifically engaging adventure with practical solutions to the many problems colonization would present, not to mention gripping philosophical debates about whether such a thing should even be attempted.

It is widely considered one of the landmark works of speculative fiction in the last 20 years.

Director James Cameron considered making it his next project after "Titanic," and now it's in the script stage at the Sci Fi Channel.

"We're very excited about it," said Bonnie Hammer, the president of Sci Fi, which is planning a four-hour movie based on "Red Planet," the first book in Robinson's trilogy.

"It's one of the defining epic stories in science fiction," said Hammer. "If it goes well, we'd think about doing it as a long-term series."

But Robinson may reach

his widest audience yet with the exceptional and engrossing "Rice and Salt," thanks to an ingenious plot device.

"I wanted to avoid those boring multi-generational sagas," admitted Robinson, who planned to cover 700 years of history, but dreaded the thought of introducing a character and then their children and then their children just to give it some continuity.

His solution was to embrace the concept of reincarnation: The novel follows three souls that keep reincarnating and crossing paths. We get three characters that change and grow over time, but also a Scheherazade-like flow of stories.

Robinson dips into history every 50 years or so with his characters, portraying everyone from a warrior who stumbles upon a village decimated by the plague in the 1400s, to an alchemist who never turns lead into gold but finds satisfaction developing scientific experiments,

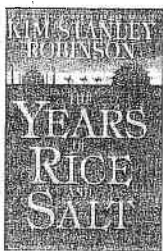
to a young woman who finds the courage to leave the safety of the veil to become a modern woman.

Robinson called on Islamic contacts he made for the "Mars Trilogy," which involved a major Islamic subplot, to get "Rice and Salt" right.

"I felt very uncertain writing about issues like the veil," said the author, who writes a convincing thumbnail explanation of why an educated, intelligent woman would choose to wear the veil but then immediately makes clear its time will pass.

"So I did my best to take my direction and cues on these issues from the Islamic women writers that I read. It is a novel that has brought up some very complicated cultural issues. I suppose in the end you can't really avoid... it would be weird to avoid expressing your own value system. I mean, what would be the point?"

"But this book certainly forced me to try and get outside and express other people's points of views."



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