Inventor, Writer and Patent Agent Wil McCarthy Adds Best Sci-Fi Novel Award to Impressive Resume

By Wil McCarthy | July 20, 2022

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Patent agent is but one of the many hats Denver's Wil McCarthy has worn in a career that led him from the tech startup world to lunar orbital launches to the offices of Haynes Boone. Already a holder of patents in seven countries, his latest achievement is for his work as a sci-fi author, for which he won the prestigious 2022 Prometheus Award for best novel. The honor, one of the oldest fan-based awards in the science fiction industry, was given to his 2021 book, "Rich Man's Sky," which envisions the future of privately owned space programs.

Wil discussed the award, as well as his wildly varied career and hobbies – a "buffet" as he calls it, in which he has tried a bit of everything. Read on to learn more.

1. First of all, congratulations on winning this award. Where does it rank among your career achievements?

Wil McCarthy: I've done a lot in my career. I've been writing since the mid '80s, but I was also an aerospace engineer. I participated in the launch of 10 satellites, one of which went to the moon. I ran a tech startup for 10 years, and then I was a consultant for a while. So, I have a diverse career with a lot of highlights. I ended up as a patent agent as a way of seeking stability from the turbulence of self-employment. Winning this award is a reminder that I have these other pursuits outside of work.

2. Tell us about the book. What is it about?

Wil: It is called "Rich Man's Sky," and it is about the future of private space programs. We see high-net-worth individuals now who have the resources to bankroll their own space programs. The question I asked is: What if you roll that out for 30 years? The good side of privately funded space programs is they're not subject to the whims of congress or the priorities of whoever happens to be in charge of NASA. They're goal-oriented and move with frightening speed in the ways they develop new technology. The downside is that the goals of the program are then the goals of a single individual rather than of our collective society. So, you have that good and that bad in tension with one another.

I tried to tell the story through as many different viewpoints as I reasonably could. The result is readers see themselves reflected in what the characters say. It becomes a Rorschach test, where everyone takes something different from the story.

3. How many books have you written and where does this book fit into the arc of what you've published thus far?

Wil: This is my 13th book and my 11th novel. It is the start of a trilogy. The next book comes out in January. Some of my works have been trilogies or series, some standalone. One was an anthology, one nonfiction.

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4. How have you managed to balance your work as a patent agent with your writing career?

Wil: I was a full-time writer for seven of the last 20 years. When you're writing to pay the mortgage, it takes a lot of the fun out of it, because it's a job. If you have other ways of paying the bills, it liberates you to be more of an artist. Certainly, when you have a job, you have to complete all the goals of that job. But everyone has hobbies, and writing is one of mine.

5. What else would folks at the firm be surprised to learn about you?

Wil: I own patents as a result of my startup career. I have patents in seven countries, including 31 issued in the U.S. But I don't know what's become of them. The startup crashed, and the assets ended up going who-knows-where, so I don't know if any of those patents are still in force, or who owns them. They all have to do with nano-structured optical materials. I started working with semiconductors to produce optical effects, and I realized I could achieve some of the same effects with liquid crystals. That led me into working with other materials like polarizers. I also invented a type of LED, although it never got produced.

That's how I got into being a patent agent. Through my own inventions, I learned the patent system. When I became a consultant, it seemed logical to take the patent bar exam, because IP was such a big piece of my work. That resulted in all kinds of patent agent work finding its way to me to the point it's all I was doing. From there, it made sense to join Hayne and Boone.

So, I've treated my career kind of like a buffet. I've tried a bit of everything.

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