

Gene Wolfe Interview

James B. Jordan

At the turn of the decade, Wolfe published three widely differing novels. *Soldier of Arete* (1989) continues the story of Latro, the amnesiac narrator of *Soldier of the Mist*; *Castleview* (1990) is a heavily intertextual recruitment fantasy that plays in intricate ways with Arthurian myth and remains Wolfe's most poorly received novel since *Operation Ares* (1970); and *Pandora by Holly Hollander* (1990) is a charming murder mystery narrated by an all-American high school girl. Two short story collections, *Storeys from the Old Hotel* (1988), a British anthology that brought Wolfe the World Fantasy Award in 1989, and *Endangered Species* (1989) were also issued. *Letters Home*, a collection of correspondence from Wolfe to his mother during his posting in Korea, and *Young Wolfe* (1992) an anthology of short fiction, both appeared from United Mythologies Press and form the starting point of Jordan's interview.

As Jordan explains, 'this interview was conducted during the 1992 World Fantasy Convention, held at Callaway Gardens, Georgia, Oct. 29–Nov. 1. The interview was conducted outside in a garden for two hours on the morning of October 30.'

JJ: A lot of what you publish comes out from small presses and sources. If you are not an insider to the SF fantasy world, you would not know where to get it or even know it had come out. Is there any comprehensive outlet for Gene Wolfe's stuff?

GW: Not that I know of. Mark Ziesing handles some of it, but he's probably as close as they come, and he has far from everything. I just don't think there is a good answer to that. I have done some stuff with Dan Knight's United Mythologies in Canada.

JJ: Is he the one that did *Young Wolfe*?

GW: Yes, he did *Young Wolfe* and *Letters Home*. And we may do another one, I am not sure. And then there is Cheap Street. The problem with Cheap Street is that they are anything but cheap! I would like to subscribe – get the Cheap Street series of books and so forth – and to be honest, I cannot afford it. I can't afford every few months to spend \$75–\$100 on a collector's piece, or at least I don't feel I can. I have better uses for the money.

JJ: My audience – the people that I write for – as I guess you’ve gathered is what is usually called evangelical Christians, a conservative, protestant audience. And I am interested first of all in discovering a little bit about your religious beliefs, if you’re willing to talk about that. Were you brought up within the Catholic Church?

GW: No, I am a convert. I was raised in a rather lax fashion as a Presbyterian. I don’t think my father had any particular religious convictions. My mother had been raised as a Presbyterian and so I was nominally a Presbyterian. It was largely an answer to give when people asked you.

JJ: And how did you become a member of the Roman Catholic Church?

GW: I married a Roman Catholic and had to take instruction in it in order that we could have a Catholic wedding. I think that is still a rule of the church, although those things are so laxly administered that you cannot always be sure. I became interested in it, read and studied, and talked to people about it and so forth, and eventually converted.

JJ: Became persuaded of the truth of it.

GW: Yes.

JJ: At that time what kind of theologians did you read, or did you read theology as such?

GW: I didn’t read a lot of theology. I read some modern books of explications of Catholic theology for laymen and that sort of thing. I would like to be able to say I read St Thomas Aquinas in the Latin and so forth, but I didn’t. It would be a lie. I read some books of Thomistic theology and biographies of St Thomas Aquinas.

JJ: Chesterton’s?

GW: Yes, I read Chesterton’s book on St Thomas Aquinas. I discovered Chesterton and ended up reading everything of Chesterton’s that I could find. I had gone through very much the same thing earlier with C. S. Lewis.

JJ: Ignatius Press is attempting to reprint all of Chesterton in a whole set. Are you collecting those?

GW: That is right, so they are. In fact they have reprinted a lot of newspaper columns that I had not seen in my initial sweep through Chesterton when I read everything I could find.

JJ: I imagine at that time it was hard to find.

GW: It was fairly difficult to find. I have also since discovered that some of those newspaper columns, as I originally read them, had been heavily edited by someone other than Chesterton for book publication. I detest that sort of thing, particularly when there is no indication given in the book that it has been done, because you think that you are reading what Chesterton wrote for a newspaper in 1905, and in fact the history paragraphs have been changed almost out of recognition.

JJ: That has happened with C. S. Lewis too, according to Catherine

Lindskoog, and she seems to have the facts to back it up.

GW: Oh, yes, *The C. S. Lewis Hoax*. With Lewis it is posthumous stuff that apparently is not Lewis at all. I was one of those people who read *The Dark Tower* and got very suspicious because I was familiar with Lewis and I think I am pretty good at spotting styles. I used to belong to a chain letter that included Gardner Dozois, Jack Dann, Chelsea Quinn Yarborough, Mike Bishop. And we would write long newsletters about our doings and then put them in a packet and they would be sent around. This was before they had computer bulletin boards and all that sort of stuff. And I could almost invariably identify the writer from the first paragraph or two. The writer was only overtly identified with the signature, because it was done in letter form. But the styles of the people who were writing were sufficiently different that I could very easily pick out most of them without difficulty. And I am a good imitator. I could write imitation Shakespeare that you would think was probably legitimate Shakespeare because there is a lot of Shakespeare for me to look at. I have sort of a knack for doing that sort of thing. I think I could write much better imitation C. S. Lewis than a lot of this supposedly posthumous stuff that is coming out. I could do it better than this guy does and I think practically any decent writer could do it better than this guy does, because he's not a writer. The reason that there is not more of that than there is, is that the people who can do it would rather write under their own name and take the credit for themselves. Why should they waste their talent in forging work for a dead man?

JJ: You have used a variety of styles in each of your novels. That is one of the characteristics of your work. I assume you will keep going. Is the series you are working on now [*The Book of the Long Sun*], to be in any of the particular styles you have used before?

GW: I don't think so. It isn't a highly very stylized series at all, largely because it is third person. I basically feel that you should write the story in the style that corresponds to the story that you have to tell, and I have tried to do that; but it comes out as a pretty much straightforward journalistic prose, I think.

JJ: Hemingwayesque?

GW: Well, no. Hemingway, I think, has a very identifiable style, which I've never tried to imitate. I think I could do a fairly decent job of it if I wanted to, but I've never particularly wanted to.

JJ: Was Jack Vance's style an influence on the style of the Severian novels?

GW: Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure. A lot of that was my deciding to rewrite *The Dying Earth* from my own standpoint.

JJ: Wonderful book.

GW: Yes it is wonderful. And of course when you read wonderful books

sometimes you think, 'Gee, I would like to do that'; and you go off and do it, trying to make it different enough that you are not really ripping off the author, but rather writing something in the same vein using some of the same ideas. I have never concealed a debt to Jack Vance and a debt to Clark Ashton Smith as far as that goes. I think Vance is very much in debt to Clark Ashton Smith.

JJ: Do you know Vance?

GW: I have met him twice I think. I certainly don't know him in the sense of being on friendly terms with him.

JJ: I gather he is not an active participant in the SF world.

GW: As far as I know he is not. A lot of it, from what I understand, is that he has severe eye problems. He is very nearly blind. I had him sign a book for me one time and I was wearing a name badge and he was asking how I spelled my name. I held out the name badge to him and he asked me again how I spelled my name, and I realized that although it was fairly large type, he couldn't make it out. His vision was that bad. Maybe it is better by now. I certainly hope so.

JJ: So Lewis and Chesterton would have been among the formative influences in your paradigm.

GW: Oh yes, very definitely.

JJ: Could you name others, within the area of theology and Christianity?

GW: The problem with this it is hard to see where to stop. Later you say, 'Gee, I should have included so and so', and you didn't think of that person at that time. J. R. R. Tolkien, just to start with. Charles Williams, not as much as the others, but to some extent. David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*, which is really strange, and I think very theologically oriented. Much of the theology I disagree with, but I thought it was marvelous as a work of fiction. It is a marvelous example of someone's expressing his theological beliefs in a novel.

JJ: Now you are reading George MacDonald?

GW: Yes, *Lilith*. I had not read anything previously except *Curdie and the Goblin* and *At the Back of the North Wind* and those types, and they are quite good but they are basically fairy stories. I had read others that were about that good, but I don't think they had any great theological impact, any great feeling from that standpoint.

JJ: Let me turn to political philosophy if I might. Your first novel, *Operation Ares*, really has that as something of a theme, John Castle. I guess that 'J. C.' is deliberate somehow. Does that novel reflect your ideas?

GW: I think it reflected them at the time that I wrote it. I don't think it does now. I think I was much more like you said you were. I was much more a doctrinaire conservative when I was a good deal younger. You said that was true of you and it was true of me. I reacted away from the gen-

eral political current in this country post-Roosevelt and became pretty much a 'William F. Buckley conservative' for a while, and then kind of split off from that. I am now in the unhappy position of finding no one that I agree with.

I am big on freedom. Freedom is the bedrock political value that we need to hold on to. Patrick Buchanan said that in his speech at the [1992] Republican convention, and he is about the only person that I have heard saying it. Today I think people are so used to being free – to having some degree of freedom – that they don't appreciate it; but people are noticeably less free now than they were, say, thirty years ago.

JJ: Buchanan opposed the war in the Middle East [the first Gulf War], and I tended to agree. It seemed to me that to become involved in a conflict between two Islamic nations was of questionable wisdom.

GW: The war in the Middle East was fought for oil. The idea was to keep oil at market prices available to the United States. Saddam Hussein was also fighting for oil. His idea was that if he could corner a large proportion of the world's oil market he could pretty much set prices himself and get a great deal of money with which to finance his war machine. He was right; he could have done that if he had succeeded. Like so many dictators including Hitler, he tried to be his own strategist. Remember the man that, when asked if he could play the saxophone, said 'I don't know; I've never tried.' If you have never done strategy – if you have never meddled around with it – you can't do it because there is a whole science that has to be acquired to be a decent strategist, and he didn't have it. He very clearly didn't have it. Hitler didn't have it either. And instead of leaving these things to people who are competent, the people with the power try to do it themselves. One of the great things that is wrong with American business is that those with the power to make decisions are often not those with the ability to make those decisions correctly.

JJ: From things you have written in the past, I wonder if you feel it might be just as well to have the price of oil double or triple so that we would be forced to come up with different sources of energy.

GW: I think we might very well say, fifty years down the road, 'Boy, that was a good thing that happened to us.' I think the private automobile has been a disaster, quite frankly. You saw Gay Haldeman last night who came up to our table. Her mother has just been killed in a automobile accident. The private automobile has squandered enormous resources and enormous energy and I think it has developed a very ugly civilization in which everything has to be built around automobile roads and parking – which isn't necessary; it just happens to be what we've got.

JJ: What could we have as an alternative in our kind of society?

GW: In our kind of society? Well obviously we could have public transportation for the longer range: railroad, some air, although I think we

have too much air now. We could have less travel, because I think we have an awful lot of unnecessary travelling going on now. And bicycles for shorter range. All of those are very viable alternatives. I once wrote a little piece on this and I am not sure where it appeared. The thing that most people don't understand about it is that you can't rely wholly on public transportation, because if you rely wholly on public transportation you are at the mercy of the unions who control the mechanism. So you have to have private transportation; but I don't think you have to have one man sitting in 5000-pound machine, which is the system that we have today.

JJ: Are there people who write in the area of politics that you read now, or do you spend your time reading fiction and doing research for your novels, and let that mainly pass by?

GW: I don't read a lot of political essays because I find most of them very predictable. I know by and large what these people are going to say after I have read a little bit of it and I generally disagree with them pretty violently. So no, I don't read much in that area. What I read is much more news than political essay.

JJ: In the *Castle of the Otter* you mentioned Lamarckianism and I had written down here to ask if you've kept up with the scientists who were working with that area today.

GW: I didn't know that anybody was working in the Lamarckian area today, to be honest with you. I think somebody should be because I have never been convinced that Lamarck was wrong. I have never seen any convincing evidence that Lamarck was wrong. What we do is we set up Lysenkoism, which is a straw man, and we call it Lamarckianism and then we disprove it – and it is very easily disproved and is in fact very unpersuasive to begin with – and then we say Lamarck was wrong. Or we say Darwin was right and therefore Lamarck cannot be right, which is not true at all because the two theories are not mutually exclusive. It's like saying that Newton was wrong because Einstein was right. Newtonian physics really is the way that you calculate a whole lot of things. Billiard balls and bullets and railroad trains and so forth are all answerable in terms of Newtonian physics. So to put Einstein against Newton says something that Einstein himself would never have said.

JJ: [In a letter preparing for this interview] I asked you about Rupert Sheldrake's work, with which you are not familiar, but in his second book, *The Presence of the Past*, he critiques the modern atomistic view of causality. He argues, from research and testing, that aside from genetics there is also the form and shape of things, a sort of platonic doctrine of form, but one that is embedded in history. He presents evidence to show that there are ways in which plants, animals, crystals, etc. can undergo changes as a result of changes in the environment. I'd thought you might be familiar

with that.

GW: It certainly sounds interesting and probably like something that I would tend to agree with. Because though I think that Darwin was right, I don't think that Darwin had the whole answer and I don't think he has it now. The kind of thing that he postulated does take place but it seems to me clear that there are other mechanisms involved as well.

JJ: I asked in the letter if you were familiar with Frances Yates's book *The Art of Memory*, which is a treatise on the entire business of building a house in the mind and the impact of that in the renaissance, particularly in the pre-literate world.

GW: I am familiar with the memory palace concept, which originally derives from Simonides, a Greek poet of the fifth century B.C. I've heard of Yates's book, but have not read it. I have made use of the memory palace system in the *Soldier* books, of course. I have *The Memory Palace of Matthew Ricci*, and have read parts of it.

JJ: Let me ask you about being a southern Catholic novelist. You wrote me one time that you do like to see yourself as a southern novelist, or perhaps a Catholic novelist. Those can be two different things, though overlapping. How would you define a southern novelist, and how do you see your work as in that school? Or is that a fair question?

GW: It is the kind of question that a critic would answer much better than I can. I think there is a great deal of regional background that southerners tend to have that northerners don't. There is the experience of growing up essentially as part of a conquered population, which is something that northerners deny, quite frankly, but nevertheless is quite true. As for being a Catholic novelist, I think the interesting thing about the Catholic novelist today – or maybe I should say *should* be the interesting thing about the Catholic novel today – is that it is the Christian tradition that is urban rather than rural. And I think that your type of Christians are very largely rural people. I think my type of Christians are very largely urban people.

[*A wasp begins to buzz around us.*]

GW: Ack! I really hate those things. We have a crabapple tree in our yard, and it drops crabapples all over, and I don't get them cleaned up in time. So we have a yard full of bees and wasps for a month. I've been stung more than once, and I really, really don't like it!

JJ: Among Catholic novelists who would you consider in that field? Francois Mauriac? Shusaku Endo? Or are you thinking mainly of Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor?

GW: The last, I suppose. I haven't read widely – I haven't read the Catholic novels specifically as a genre. Perhaps I should. The problem I have is that there are a thousand directions in which I ought to be going, and I generally can't go terribly far in any of them.

JJ: Urban versus rural: I wonder if you would continue with that.

GW: I think the Catholic tradition in America is derived largely from people who got here after the farms had been claimed. The early settlers – some Irish but mainly Scotch, English, German and so forth – came here, and being intelligent and reasonable people staked out claims to the good land and started growing corn and such. The Catholic strain in the American life comes from Poles and Italians and so on, and the later wave of Irish immigration during the potato famine, who arrived after the good farms were pretty much owned already. You couldn't go out and get those, and so these later people became policemen and hod carriers and building contractors and school teachers and so forth. And that urban environment is where the American Catholic tradition is located, as far as I can see. Father Andrew Greeley, whom I have never met, is probably nevertheless my favorite priest, and he is very much aware of that and tends to write about it. I think he is right.

JJ: Does that conviction show up in any of your writings, or is that just what you believe a 'mainstream' Catholic novelist should devote his attention to?

GW: I think that the mainstream Catholic novelist is not going to be able to avoid that completely even if he tries. If you are a Christian you cannot help writing as a Christian. You can disguise it, but there are still acute people who will see through the disguise and say, 'Aha, back in here is a Christian background.' And I think if you're Catholic the same thing is true: people will say, 'Back in here is a Catholic background.' Somebody was describing a Brian Lumley novel to me today and I said, 'Is he Catholic?' I have not read the novel. (I have read very little Brian Lumley; I wish I had read more. I intend to read more after meeting him here at this convention.) But the outline as it was being presented to me made it sound so much as if he were writing from an English Catholic tradition.

Of course, before I ever went to England I thought that there were no Catholics there, and if they were they would reflect the same kind of thing that we have in Northern Ireland today, which is just horrible incredibly awful stuff: people putting bombs in cars and killing little kids in the name of Jesus Christ on both sides! You can't imagine a more unchristian thing than this neighbor-killing-neighbor thing that Northern Ireland goes through! But when I went to England I found there were plenty of Catholic churches and that nobody was scrawling graffiti over them or throwing rocks at the people who went to Mass, or any of that sort of thing. Rosemary and I went to Mass whenever we were so inclined. So Lumley might very well be Catholic. Chesterton obviously was and so was Tolkien. Both were English Catholics.

JJ: In *The Urth Cycle* (let's call it that), obviously memory is a large theme and you have brought the sacraments, at least the sacrament of baptism,

into play repeatedly in the book. There are an awful lot of occasions where people pass through water and experience some type of death and resurrection. There also seem to be images of the eucharist.

GW: There are diabolical eucharists: people who are eating corpses in order to get the memory of the dead person. And of course when a Catholic receives communion he is receiving the flesh of Christ in a mystical sense. He is doing what Christ asked him to do, which is to absorb a little piece of Christ into himself to make himself more Christ-like; and so we go forward in the Mass and we consent to that, saying that I wish to be more like Christ. Whoever is giving out communion, the priest or someone assisting the priest says, 'The body of Christ' and holds up the host, and you say 'Amen', meaning 'Yes, I agree this is the body of Christ', and then you take it and eat it.

JJ: Now the climax of that inversion seems to be when Severian actually eats the brains of the preceding autarch. Did you see that as another form of the diabolical communion? Or something that was necessary? It seems to be necessary to the novel.

GW: What I was doing was to say that in order to be a good ruler you must be familiar with the tradition of *that* rule – of that country and of the people in the past who have administered that country. No, not diabolical in that case. The diabolical thing is more Vodalus and the grave-robbers.

JJ: Who are into it just for thrills.

GW: Well, yes they are doing it for trivial reasons. Evil is always a distortion or an exaggeration of something that is good. People don't understand that now.

JJ: Are the other sacraments of the Catholic church present in the novel? Are Severian's various liaisons along the way false forms of matrimony, or in some sense symbolic of it?

GW: They are more manifestations of the search for love, which I think is a great quest of life. What we go into life really looking for is love. And as you've said in your letters, I don't think of Severian as being a Christ figure; I think of Severian as being a Christian figure. He is a man who has been born into a very perverse background, who is gradually trying to become better. I think that all of us have somewhere in us an instinct to try and become better. Some of us defeat it thoroughly. We kill that part of ourselves, just as we kill the child in ourselves. It is very closely related to the child in us.

JJ: Is Valeria the ideal love for him?

GW: No.

JJ: Where would you say it lies in the novel?

GW: I think that the true ideal of love for any person is God. It isn't another human being. If my wife were here she would be deeply offended by that [*laughter*]. I don't mean that God is the only thing that a person

can love. I think the *final* object of love is God.

JJ: Right. But within the horizons of a human life, is Severian still searching in the end?

GW: Very much so.

JJ: 'Man is a wolf to man.' You actually quote that in *Soldier of Arete*. You've traded on the wolf idea a lot, obviously, but that brings up the question of horror fiction. Both of the panels you have participated in at this convention have been about horror. You are not really a horror writer, though, and you don't write just to shock. But there are many times in your novels that you have deliberately brought the reader to the place where he is shocked or horrified in order to, hopefully, invoke a reaction against what you are presenting: This is bad and you should be shocked.

So, on the wolf-theme: In your story 'The Hero as Werwolf', what were you hoping to get the reader to think about?

GW: I was trying to get the reader to think about the real nature of love between man and woman. In the first place, the girl in 'The Hero as Werwolf' is retarded and cannot speak. And, secondly, in the end she has to damage very badly the man she loves in order to set him free. I think I was trying to say, first, that you must not think that the person you love has to be a whole lot like you in order for that love to be real and working. And second, that we all, if we are going to be honest, have to hurt people in order to do them good. We have to tear away parts of them in order to do them good.

JJ: The young man in 'Hero' has a wounded foot, as does Severian. Does that come from the Bible, as a sign of the kind of character who receives the foot-wound rather than head-crushing, as Genesis 3 speaks of it?

GW: I'm not sure. If so it was unconscious. I don't think I did that consciously. I think it may very well reflect Biblical reading.

JJ: That is a theme in the Scripture, and Jacob winds up with a limp in Genesis 32. It is as if, as you have pointed out in especially in the Severian novels, it is necessary for God to bruise and wound us in order to make us grow.

GW: This is the same thing. God is the ultimate Lover above the human lover, and God has to do that. It would be very nice for me, I think, if I didn't have to work, and if I never got into any kind of trouble, and everybody thought that I was wonderful, and so forth and so on. In the long-range view, that isn't how you make a larger and better person. You meet people who have really been through it and really, truly suffered – who have been, let's say, a prisoner in the Hanoi Hilton for years, or something like that. Then you discover, yes, they got something out of it that I don't have.

I don't mean that I don't flee from pain and so forth just as all of us do.

I'm at least as cowardly as the average person, probably worse.

JJ: I don't think we are supposed to embrace pain. On the other hand, we understand the purpose of it when it comes ...

GW: We try to.

JJ: ... whether the dark night of the soul or something else.

GW: You always tend to say, 'Why this? Couldn't it have been something else?' It is the problem of pain, which C. S. Lewis has an essay on. I still run across people who talk about pain as if nobody had ever dealt with it before. The idea of pain is to keep you from doing those things that are destructive. And they say 'Surely there is another way that God could teach us.' Yes, there are other ways, but you would complain about those other ways, too, just as you complain about pain. It would only change the dressing of the situation, not the situation itself.

JJ: And if you believe that God has good intentions, then whatever the pain was, it was indeed actually the best remedy. Now, along these lines, is the torturer of which Severian is the shadow, is that God? Is Severian the shadow of The Torturer?

GW: No, I think the idea there is that of the torturer coming between the victim and God and casting a shadow, serving as the oppressor or as a satanic figure. Severian is engaged in working his way out of his profession, which is torture.

JJ: So although there are analogies between what God has to put us through and what a torturer does, that was not your view. It was rather an inversion at that notion?

GW: Well, I wasn't seeing the torturer as the hand of God, if that is what you mean. No, I don't think so. I think that Satan does what God wishes him to do; it is just that he doesn't want to. And I think the torturer is in the same position. He is frequently doing what God wants him to do but he is not trying to please God by doing it.

JJ: Right. He is the Assyrian that God brings in against the Israelites.

GW: Yes.

JJ: Now, in my letter I asked a question that I figured you would not like. I wrote that there seemed to be a number of women who are less sympathetic than male characters in many of your books. You strongly disagreed, which I expected.

GW: Well, as regards some of the characters.

JJ: Let's begin with Ann Schindler. What struck me about her in *Castleview* was this section where one woman is saying the rosary and Ann Schindler starts to 'pray' by thinking through a recipe. What came to my mind was the Biblical phrase 'whose god is their belly'. It seemed to be a form of idolatry.

GW: But I wasn't showing that Ann was a bad person; I was showing that she was in a barren culture. That the only thing that she could come up

with was this, and I intended this to be humorous rather than condemnatory. I thought Ann was basically a good person. I am sensitive about this because a reviewer called her a pitiless satire of the middle aged housewife or something like that, which was by no means what I had intended.

JJ: She is a woman who hasn't taken her husband's name, so I would not think that she is your average middle-class housewife.

GW: No, she certainly is 'liberated' in some degree. But she is also courageous, intelligent, inquisitive, and she quite genuinely loves her husband and her daughter. She is not faking that. She actually loves Will, not as much as Will would like, but she loves him. And she loves her daughter Mercedes enormously, fiercely.

JJ: I want to ask you about Laura in *There Are Doors*. Having only been through it once and scanned it yesterday, I'm still not exactly sure about what Laura is.

[*The wasp returns! GW ducks and tries to avoid it.*]

GW: My wife is pro-wasp and anti-spider, while I am pro-spider and anti-wasp.

JJ: He's over here on my coat now.

GW: I hope he stays there! [*Laughter.*]

Laura is my idea of what a pagan goddess might be who survived into the Christian world. One of the places where I probably split off from conventional Catholic thinking is that I believe that the gods of paganism were real. I don't think that they are entitled to the worship that they received from the pagans. I think what many of the biblical writers are saying is, 'Yes, these are real powers, but it is wrong for you to give to them the honors that are due to God alone.' And I think that that is exactly correct. Now, if Aphrodite were to survive into the contemporary world, what would she be like? Well, Laura was a shot at trying to show what she might be like.

JJ: Is there an attempt to redeem Laura on the part of the church?

GW: On the part of the author, not on the part of the church.

JJ: I ask because the Italian restaurant is one of the doorways between the two worlds.

GW: Yes. You said that Mama wanted Laura to marry Green, and she does want her to marry Green. That is because she thinks that Green is a nice guy, which he is. He is kind of dumb, but he is a nice guy. Laura is a nice girl, which is kind of true. And she would like to see them get together. She has that maternal married woman desire to see more married couples and children and so forth.

In *There Are Doors* I wanted to do something that I think has only rarely been done. It certainly has been done, but it isn't done very often. I wanted to present a protagonist who isn't very intelligent. Green isn't. He has almost no virtues. By that I don't mean that he has many vices, but he is

not outstanding in any good way. He is a man of very limited intelligence, not terribly courageous, not terribly energetic or enterprising or any of those other things. He is the sort of man who would be quite content to work all his life in a dead end job and never try to get very far outside of that – except that he meets Laura. That is what changes him. Laura is looking for lovers, but Green is looking for love and he has found it, or he thinks he has found it. And whether she loves him or not, he loves her enormously. He can deal with the idea that she doesn't love him, that she doesn't have any particular feeling for him. It makes no difference to him; he still loves her.

JJ: Now, as I read the novel the first time, it appeared to me that Tina and the dolls like her were given to train the men of that world in an idolatrous worship of Laura as the goddess, and that would be an anti-Christian idea. And that Green's affection for her and his overwhelming pursuit of her would be similarly problematic.

GW: This is the Christian world. That world is not the Christian world. That world is kind of a warmed-over pagan world. And that is what I tried to show it as. People always fault me on it by saying I did not work out what a world would be like in which men died after intercourse, but I feel that I did.

JJ: You raise that question in the book itself.

GW: How different would it be? I don't think it would be as different as a lot of people want to think it would be. You would have a lot of men who would refrain from intercourse either throughout their life or at least until the very end of their lives. And you would have a more feminine oriented society. A feminine viewpoint would have more influence than it does in our society. Although it does have a great deal in our society, it would have still more there.

JJ: And you believe that there are significant differences between feminine and masculine viewpoints.

GW: Absolutely. We're too biologically different not to have differences in viewpoint. Of course, we have to get away from the idea that one side is good and the other bad, which we have been struck on now throughout recorded history. The great majority of men have held that women are somehow innately evil; and the great majority of women saying when they dared, and often thinking when they dared not speak it aloud, that men were all beasts and brutes and so forth. The terrible thing is that so much of the bad stuff we say about each other is true. But we keep yelling for other people to be good without trying to be good ourselves. We are the only people we can make good. I can make me good, or I can at least try, and you can make you good; but neither one of us can do much for the other.

JJ: At the end of the novel Green goes off in pursuit of Laura in Manea

near Overwood, and that leaves the novel open. Do you intend to come back to it?

GW: I might. I didn't intend to go back to it at the time I wrote it.

JJ: Does he make any mistake running after her?

GW: Oh no, no. I don't think he's making a mistake. I think he is making the great correct decision of his life, which is to go after such love as he sees.

JJ: Even if what is there at the end is likely to be hollow? Because she doesn't really *love*, does she? She just wants lovers.

GW: But how is that going to be at the end, and how much is that going to matter to him? He has found something to love. I think the trouble with a whole lot of people in this world is that there is nothing at all that they care deeply about. And it is certainly the trouble with Green. But now he has found something to care deeply about and he is making the correct decision. He has not made the mistake of saying, 'It is too much trouble and so I'm not going to do it.' I have a friend named Paul who is only a little bit younger than I am. I am 61. Paul must be about 50. And he is training now to be a missionary and he is going to go most likely into South America and do missionary work. And I think he is absolutely right. I know Paul, and he has finally found what he needed to find all his life and he is making the right decision. It is not going to be comfortable and it might be painful, and it is darn hard for a man his age to throw off everything and start studying all the things he has to study in order to be ordained in his church, the Church of Christ, and become a missionary, but that is what he is going to do. That is the right decision for him.

JJ: North in this book reminded me of Gordon Liddy.

GW: Very much so, very deliberately so. I originally started out with the idea of modeling him on Oliver North. He had a different name at that time. And I later came to realize that [Oliver] North was not the sort of person I thought he was. But Liddy really was and I read Liddy's book *Will*, which is an astonishingly good book, and I sort of caricatured Liddy to some degree.

They aren't very many of them, but there really are people like [my] North. North is unconsciously oriented to a death-wish that he can't control. He is trying to get himself killed. Because he is, he raises every confrontation to the level of a life and death struggle. He is the sort of man who shoots the policeman who stops him to give him a speeding ticket. I have nothing against Liddy, and was not intending to take a shot at him or do him harm. I just felt that what he presented of himself in *Will* was fascinating as a type of person, somewhat self-destructive.

JJ: Another thing that I raised that you didn't like at all was from the novel *Peace*. Let me make a case and then you show me where I am wrong and we can maybe discuss how this comes about. But as I reread *Peace*, I

reread a lot of it and I found that you have a story in there, you have four suitors for Olivia. Olivia is Olive Branch Peace. That reminds me of the fairy stories where several brothers pursue something.

GW: Well, we do in those fairy stories in the course of the book.

JJ: Julius Smart is the one who wins her hand. He is a man who takes over a pharmacy. A pharmacy dispenses drugs. Dispenses grace. The man who was there before was giving out drugs that were very damaging and Smart doesn't like that idea. He cleans the place up. She is unfaithful to him but he forgives her. He is said to be a symbolic figure and the central character in the book. He owns the company for which Weer works but when he comes around to inspect Weer and all of the fellows fake up as if they were doing good work and are not willing to be seen for what they really are. And all of those things pointed in the direction that Julius Smart would have symbolic weight attached to him and is something of a revelation of a Christ figure. You, however, objected to that idea. I wonder why ...

GW: I certainly wasn't conscious of doing it while writing the book. I guess that is about the best that I can say.

JJ: Is he symbolic and central to the book?

GW: I didn't intend him as a symbolic figure I don't believe. I intended him as an ordinary, middle class American. If he symbolizes anything he symbolizes the mass of ordinary working class, lower-middle class America.

JJ: Okay. I wanted to ask you this about *Peace* too. It came up in the discussion yesterday when one of the panelists said that he tried to write a mainstream novel, but that it was not until he finally added a fantasy element to it that it took off in his mind. So often this novel has been interpreted not as a ghost story or as having any supernatural elements but simply as the ruminations of an old man. Why isn't it that? In other words, why didn't you just write it as an old man thinking over his life. What added dimension is there to it that caused you to want to make it a man who is already dead thinking over his life?

GW: Because I wanted to lend to the memories certain supernatural strengths that an old man thinking over his life wouldn't have. I wanted to do the rooms as re-creations of rooms that he had known as a very young man and I didn't think that anybody would actually do that – that it had to be a supernatural stick or a mental quirk or something of that sort. I wanted some interplay between the remembered figures and the present reality, and so on, that I could not have gotten with just reminiscence.

JJ: Okay. It is a very Proustian novel all the same I suppose.

GW: I think it is Proustian and I am a great Proust fan. I have read *Remembrance of Things Past* I think about two and a half times. I don't read it more because when I start reading it I stop reading everything else. Unfortunately,

I am in a position of having a lot of things that I have to read or owe it to other people to read so that I can give them promotional quotes, or things that I need to read to research something I am writing currently, non-fiction and so on.

JJ: I know you have to make a decision among the novels to be awarded prizes at this conference so you have to read all of them.

GW: Well, I had to at least start all of those. The World Fantasy Award was not only for best novel but for best non-fiction and for best story collection and for best short story as well.

JJ: Oh, my, you had a lot to read.

GW: All that. And the only way that you can possibly do it is to begin each work and stop as soon as you say to yourself 'I am not going to vote a prize for this work', and then go on to the next one. And if you find that you can't stop then you had better rethink the decision 'I am not going to vote a prize for this work', because if it is not that good how come you can't put it down? But I finished very few of the books that I started for that. The best one by the way which is a very Christian, very Catholic novel is *Mojo and the Pickle Jar* which was my top pick for the World Fantasy Award; and I couldn't convince any of the other judges it should even be in the running, I think probably because it is too Christian.

JJ: Who is the author of that?

GW: A man named Douglas Bell who lives down in Texas around Dallas somewhere whom I have never met and know nothing about him except his name and that I saw a jacket picture of him on the book. But it's about a young, not very good man in Texas who is working in his uncle's roadside cafe when a Mexican girl comes in with something in a jar, in a pickle jar. The heart of a saint. And she is being pursued by the minions of a cocaine baron because she has been involved in a drug deal that has gone wrong. And the young man is Mojo, the girl's name I think is Juanita. Right out he tries to help her. They go on the lam from the people who are trying to kill them. But they are carrying with them this miracle-working religious relic. It is a good piece. I would have been very happy to have written it.

JJ: Do you read Timothy Powers or James Blaylock much?

GW: I certainly haven't read Blaylock much. I have read Powers a little bit more than Blaylock.

JJ: In *Peace*, is Weer in Purgatory working toward peace?

GW: Yeah, I think probably he is.

JJ: Is that something you thought about when you wrote it?

GW: That is not the way I conceived it when I wrote it. I conceived it more that he was a ghost trying to make sense of his own life. And I think that is another way of saying that. Goodness knows we don't know much about Heaven and we know even less about Hell and we hardly know

anything about Purgatory at all. What is it? And if you believe in ghosts – and I happen to believe in ghosts – what’s going on with them? Long, long ago, one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries said that hell is not a place; it is a state: Wherever I am, hell is. *Dr Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe. And I think that he is right. The old attempts to locate Heaven above the clouds, and Hell in the bowels of the volcano and so forth, I think are not only obviously naïve, but they are fundamentally wrong in that they are looking for countries in the sense that North America or Ireland or whatever are countries, and I don’t think that is what those things are. I think they are states.

JJ: The book of Revelation uses the image of the lake of fire in front of the throne of God, which I think implies that everyone winds up in the same place, except some like it and some don’t.

GW: Well, I think that may very well be. It’s a question, I think, of the soul’s relationship with God after death. If that relationship is fundamentally good then the soul is in Heaven. Jesus kept saying the kingdom of Heaven is here. It is not in the far future, it is here and now. And it is here and now for those whose relationship with God is correct.

JJ: Let me ask you about *Soldier of the Mist* and *Soldier of Arete*. Are those historical novels or fantasy novels?

GW: Well, they are historical fantasy. What I tried to do ...

JJ: To put it another way: Do we have fallen angels here, or perhaps some kind of powers that really were operative in the world before the arrival of the kingdom of God?

GW: That is my personal belief. I think that the gods of paganism were real. But what I tried to do was to write about that pagan world as the pagans themselves wrote about it. If we read modern historians we are reading a very rationalistic viewpoint of this, which says that all of these people were absolutely wasting their time by building temples to Ares or Apollo or you name it, and by offering sacrifices in worship and all that, because there was nothing there. Nothing at all there and that whether it is true or not that certainly is not the way the people who were doing it felt. They were convinced that there was something there and they had all sorts of legends and so forth about the appearances of the gods, and in fact there is one place in Acts where Paul and another one of the apostles are mistaken for Zeus and Mercury – rather, Zeus and Hermes! Here we are, mixing the Latin and the Greek, which is what I was trying to get away from! They are mistaken for Zeus and Hermes in human form because people in those days expected that you could see Zeus and Hermes in human form. I am not so sure they were wrong. I am not convinced that they were wrong. We love to think how much smarter we are than people of ancient times or biblical times or so forth, but I am very dubious about that.

JJ: I agree with you. There aren't many people who think that any more. We have the influence of rationalism in our society. I think that what most of us are taught about the ancient world is too often nonsense. One of the primary things being the fact that the church fathers say that the Hebrew scriptures were known around the ancient world and I imagine that they were. They weren't secret documents. People like Aristotle were curious for anything they could get their hands on.

GW: People like Aristotle read any book that they could find because books were rare. When I was a kid reading fantasy and science fiction and that sort of thing, it was hard to find that type of material and anything that you could find you read.

JJ: Yes I agree, even when I was young it was still that way.

Now, you do seem to have some symbolic overtones in *Soldier of Arete*. Certainly with Latro, or Lucius, which I guess was his real name and which means wolf. There is a wolf aspect in his being from Rome, being a descendant of Romulus at least in some way, and then Ares being the primary agricultural and martial god of Rome, Mars. He actually seems to incarnate Ares on occasion. In the mythology, Aphrodite, although married to Hephaestus, is carrying on an affair with Ares. She seems to come to him one night. These things happen ...

GW: I thought she was married to Ares.

JJ: She is married to Hephaestus, Vulcan. She cheats with Ares. Vulcan catches them in the net and there is a certain amount of punishment that Ares goes through as well.

GW: Okay, I still think there are other poets in which she is married to Ares.

JJ: There may be other versions.

GW: Anyway.

JJ: Is there a larger picture here? I raise the question when Lucius leaves Greece he leaves Io and Polos in the care of Pindar. Polos means a small horse. Io at least for you means joy. Is he leaving joy and myth in the care of poetry? Is there a symbolic dimension?

GW: Yeah, there is. Every once in a while you say, 'Gee, that's neat; I'll do that.' And you do it. I wasn't writing the whole book that way. The book isn't intended as an allegory. The book really is intended to show the problems faced by a genuinely good man who can't remember. Because it seems to me that is the problem of our society. We have a genuinely good society, by which I mean it is made up of people who by and large are quite decent individuals. But our society has no memory because it has no awareness of history.

JJ: Right.

GW: And so we have this America blundering around on the world stage more or less as Latro does. Latro is strong and able and tries to be a force

for good but he can't remember.

JJ: That is an interesting perspective on it, I hadn't thought of at all. One of my wife's professors taught in a Moslem country for a while and said he woke up one day and observed some children tossing kittens up into the air and hitting them with a baseball bat against the wall while their mothers just sat by and watched. He said, 'I am not a Christian, I am an atheist; but I am a Christian in that I could not tolerate that. There has been an influence in our society that has made us different.'

GW: Yes, yes, right. We vastly underestimate the importance of Jesus. We think we don't. We have all these churches and we say, 'How can we be underestimating Jesus?' Well, we don't, until we start trying to figure out what it would be like if He had never lived. When you really start trying to figure out what it would be like if He never lived you realize that He is a much more pivotal figure than we give Him credit for. All of these people, everybody at this [World Fantasy] convention are in that sense Christians, although most of them would tell you that they are not and some of them would tell them quite truthfully that they are Jews who practice Judaism in one of its various forms and so on and so forth. Nevertheless, they have been influenced by Christ much more than they realize. We are very lucky to have had Him. We are very fortunate.

A friend of mine learned to read Turkish. And he got hold of a Turkish joke book and read it. And I said, 'What were the jokes like?' He said it was horrible. They were all about ugly tricks that were being played on blind people and things like that. This is what we have escaped from, and we don't realize that it is there and we came very close to falling into it. We very easily could have, and we still may.

JJ: It is a striking thing that if you read the book of Leviticus [ch. 19:14], it is right there: You will never put a stumbling block in front of a blind person and you will never curse at the deaf. That kind of thing is unique. But as you say it is common in other cultures.

In the preface to *Soldier of the Mist* you tell us that Latro knows a little bit of Hebrew but the only people like that he runs into are Phoenicians. I wondered if the fact that the Phoenicians are the ones who rescue him in the end and take him home had a symbolic overtone to you.

GW: Not tremendously. It was just at the time I was planning a third book and I wanted to get him into the Semitic world and out of the Hellenic world that the first two books were laid in very largely, and to involve him with the Phoenicians and the Jews and the Syrians and that part of the world. When I originally conceived the series I wanted to do a tour of the ancient world so to speak. And I had hoped in fact to get him into the new world where there were the Mayan and the various American Indian civilizations. I really dislike the term Native American. I realize Indians is not a very good term for them, but I don't think Native Americans is a

good term either. Anyway, I wanted to do all those things, but after the second book David Hartwell, my editor, called me up and told me not to write the third one. He now denies that, by the way, but he did.

JJ: He thought they were so difficult to read?

GW: David said it was too difficult to sell well, and David is as good at self-deception as most of us, so I didn't. I went off and did something else. Now I don't know if I will ever write what I was going to write, *Soldier of Sidon*. Sidon [long i] or 'siddon' [short i]? I would pronounce it Sidon. [*Soldier of Sidon* was published by Tor in December 2006 – *PW*]

JJ: Well, Sidon in English, or Seedon [long o] in ancient speech. My impression is that words that are used commonly you say in their Anglicized forms and ones that are uncommon you try to say in the way they would in the ancient world.

GW: That is certainly a good rule, but the question then is what is common and what isn't.

JJ: That's right. Especially nowadays.

GW: Who is to do the determining? People today, half of them have no idea who Julius Caesar was. They have heard the name but if you asked them, 'What did Caesar do? Why is he an important historical figure?' they wouldn't be able to give you much of an answer.

JJ: Latro's world seems to be a really horrible world and one that you would want to escape from. Were you just being ruthlessly honest there or were you seeking to evoke that response in the reader? This is not where we want to be; we want to be in a world that is more Christian.

GW: I think certainly that is true. I think I was reacting against an idealization of the ancient world that many people have. One of the ancient authors has this story – I think it is an ancient author – about the woman who goes to Plato or one of the great philosophers and describes this ideal society that she and her friends are going to set up. And they are going to have ritual dancing and do all these Ursula LeGuin things. And he says, 'But who is going to do all the work? You are going to need food and so forth.' She says, 'Oh, we'll have slaves.'

JJ: Of course.

GW: That was very much the idealism of the ancients: ideally someone else will do it.

JJ: Right. But then, a gradual diminution of slavery and the development of liberty is a long-term impact of Christianity.

GW: Well, also machinery, simple technology. I'm an engineer and I intend to take credit for what we can. I think the steam engine probably did more to free slaves than any human being. More than Abraham Lincoln did or U. S. Grant.

JJ: And so many of these fundamental technological advances were made in the so-called Dark Ages when the church was in charge of things.

GW: Well, the church very largely saved ancient civilization. We know much of what we do know about ancient civilization because the Church preserved that for us. That is one of things we owe the Church. I am not one of those people who try and say the Church has never done anything wrong. The Church is an organization made up of human beings and has existed for 2,000 years. It's had enormous opportunities to go wrong and it often has, but the thing that I think separates the Church from most other human institutions is that the Church has always tried to go right. It just hasn't always succeeded. Most of our human institutions are very willing to strike a bargain with the devil if they think they can get good enough terms. That is always a bad thing to do.

Do I have a wasp in my hair?

JJ: No. You do have a ladybug on your shoulder, though.

GW: Oh, that's fine. Ladybugs are okay.

JJ: *Soldier of Arete*, even more than *Soldier of the Mist*, is a bit hard to follow in terms of plot. And I remember when it came out Orson Scott Card really complained about it. In *Analog* or one of those magazines he had a review that said, 'Nobody reads Gene Wolfe with more care and affection than I do, but I can't figure out what this book is about. What is wrong with this author?' Does that kind of complaint bother you?

GW: Oh, yes.

JJ: Or do you feel as if you wish you had left more clues, or do you feel, 'Hey, read the book and look at it again and you will find the answers.'

GW: I try not to leave a clue more than once because it bothers me a lot when it is left more than once in somebody else's book. If you've told me once that the hero is left-handed, I have registered it or at least I hope I have registered it, and if you tell me five times then I feel that you are writing for somebody that is a lot dumber than I am. So I try and leave my clues once and generally try and leave all the clues that I think the reader is going to require, sometimes more than they require, because you don't generally find situations in which you have exactly as much information as you need to solve the thing. If it is solvable at all you probably have more. If you have only a very few items then it probably isn't solvable with the information that you have. What you need to do in a real life situation is to go out and get more clues. If you know anything about actual police work, very little of it consists of reasoning from clues and the great majority of it consists of finding more clues. Because when you have found enough then you have very little difficulty in understanding what they mean.

JJ: In the *Soldier* novels you seem to have in the background a war between the moon and the earth. Is there anything there beyond the fact that those who worship the moon had conquered territory that formerly belonged to Gaea?

GW: I was trying to show the difference between the old matriarchal or more female-oriented society and the more patriarchal society that in fact displaced it. I think that the majority of the things that the women's libbers write is nonsense, but every once in a while they are right like everybody else. Everybody is right once in a while and this is one of the things they are right about. There really was a much more female-oriented mother-goddess worship, and the obvious key point is Delphi. If you read about Delphi in classic time you are very clearly reading about a shrine at which a goddess has been displaced by a god. The priests at Delphi in classical times were not permitted to wear shoes and they had to sleep on the ground. And they were priests of Apollo and this makes no sense for priests of Apollo. It makes a great deal of sense for priests of the earth goddess, which is what they originally were, and they carried these traditions through. And I was trying to show that war, that struggle, in terms of its divinity.

JJ: So the moon goddess is actually allied with her brother.

GW: She was. And she was a part of the new mythology that was displacing the old mythology. Basically the Zeus-centered mythology was displacing the Gaea-centered mythology.

JJ: Okay. I was not sure what was happening at the initiation of Sparta at the end. Do you mind shedding light on that?

GW: That was all real. That all happened. What they did ...

JJ: What the Spartans did?

GW: Yes. The Spartans were the most totalitarian people that I have ever come across. They made the Nazis look like boy scouts. They really did it, and they did it for a hundred years, and they were so totalitarian as to be almost unbelievable. One of the strange things about Sparta was they had the two kings as I am sure you realize. I don't know of anybody else that had a double monarchy like that, with two kings, like the Spartans had. One of the strange things is that the kings really represented the good past in Sparta. They were relics from the time when Sparta was a Greek state much like other Greek states. They were slowly being constricted and crowded out by the totalitarian ethic that seized power – it was like they had G. Gordon Liddy as an immortal dictator – that seized and effectually ruined Sparta.

The king who died at Thermopylae, Leonidas, armed the Helots [state-owned serfs/slaves]. It was death for a Helot to touch a weapon. If you saw a Helot with his hand on your bow, you were supposed to kill it. Leonidas, who was one of the Spartan kings and was certainly a very brave leader in war – there is no question that he was a man of immense physical courage – also had the immense moral courage to say, 'We are going to need these men. Let's stop this nonsense. Let's arm them and use them as troops because we need every man that we can get.' And he did.

And so when the Spartans were fighting the Persians, their light infantry and their skirmishers and so forth were bands of armed Helots. At the end of the war they said, 'We are going to reward you Helots by giving those who did most in the war their freedom. And they will be not equals, who will be able to run for office and vote and so on and take part in the government, but they will be free individuals living in Sparta and free as such people were. And so you are to name for us those Helots who were your leaders in the late war, those who should be rewarded like this.'

Then they held a ceremony that I described in detail exactly as it was, and they gave each Helot who was to be awarded his freedom at the climax of the ceremony a young Spartan as his companion to lead him through the ceremony. And at a given signal each companion killed the Helot that he was responsible for. And they were all killed except Latro, whom they did not intend to kill because he was not really a Helot. And he survived and all of the rest of them who had gone into the ceremony were butchered. And they really were. This really took place. This is the reason that I say that these people were totalitarians.

The University of Michigan's football team is called the Spartans. And you could have no clearer indication that the University of Michigan does not really understand what was going on in the ancient world. No way would they allow that if the people who are running the University of Michigan understood what the real Spartans were like. They were certainly not like our football players by any means.

JJ: I thought that was what was going on but I wasn't sure. And I wasn't sure why Latro was there but I can see it now. That depresses him terribly.

GW: Oh yes, yes. Latro is under tremendous psychological pressure because of the fact that he can't remember, and this has added an enormous burden of guilt to him because he survived. Remember now that this ceremony with the ancient gods is very significant to him. He is an ancient man and he belongs in all this and now, when all the others have died and he is the sole survivor, he gets an enormous amount of guilt out of this and goes into clinical depression.

JJ: Does the novel anywhere explain why Latro has been struck in the head?

GW: I don't think it does. My idea as I said originally was that he desecrated the temple during the battle of Plataea. A lot of the battle of Plataea was hand to hand fighting in the temple and it occurred to me that the temple could not have been kept in very good order when a bunch of Persians and Greeks were trying to kill each other in it. Of course the initial idea for the whole series of books was that Xerxes would get a band of Roman exiles and enlist them as mercenaries in his army. If you have read Herodotus you know that there is an enormous catalog. There were ancient tribes that we know of only because there was a group of them

servicing as mercenaries in Xerxes' army or sent by tributary kings and so forth. Xerxes seems to have gathered together every fighting man he could scrape up. Of course what happened – I guess I am going far off the subject – but what happened was that he lost the battle of Salamis, which meant that he lost control, which means he lost the ability to supply this huge army that he had put into the field and he had to withdraw most of it because he couldn't feed the troops. And you know, a small band of raiders or plunderers can live off the land; but when you are talking about hundreds of thousands of men, they cannot do it; the land hasn't got that much food.

JJ: So that was something that might have come up in the third volume if you had not been discouraged from writing it?

GW: Absolutely. The black man, whom nobody ever talks about but whom I intended as a major figure, was an Ethiopian. And Xerxes actually had Ethiopians who were armed with Stone Age weapons – spears tipped with antelope horn and that sort of thing – and he had these people in his army. So the black man was one of those Ethiopians who were sent by the King of Ethiopia as mercenaries. The King of Ethiopia was paid to send warriors to the army that Xerxes was going to invade Greece with.

JJ: He could have had American Indians in his army from what I can tell about the ancient world.

GW: I think you are saying that there was a lot more interaction within the ancient world than we in the New World give them credit for. Absolutely right.

JJ: They have found Peregrini Irish monk inscriptions in places in America but the establishment view just will not admit that it could be true.

GW: I know one of the leading scholars in this, Cyrus Gordon. I had dinner with him; well I have had dinner with him twice. Once in a restaurant, but the one I was thinking of he had us over for dinner, and we ate with him. We had a friend who is now deceased, Sharon Baker, a talented writer who was really just getting started and she was 55 or so when she died of cancer. But Sharon was his niece so she introduced me to him. He is a pariah because he keeps bringing up this stuff and saying, 'But look, look at the evidence!' And they keep saying, 'Oh, he is an old crackpot. Send him off. That nut.' He is saying, 'But why was the army of Yucatan arranged just like an Assyrian army?' They say, 'That's just a coincidence.' He says, 'But why was the loom used in the Yucatan just like the loom that was used in the Mediterranean about 1000 B.C.?' They say, 'Oh well, that is a coincidence that they developed the same sort of loom.'

And can I tell you, this is a hobby-horse of mine. I shouldn't use up our time with this, but I am an engineer by trade. We know how the wheel was invented. Archeology has established how the wheel was invented. The wheel was invented by people who started out by laying down logs and

putting big stones on the logs and pushing them. When you do that you have to pick up the end log and you have to carry it around to the front so that it feeds in under the stone. When you do this, your log takes on a coke bottle shape. There are engineering reasons for why it wears in this pattern.

Say that there is a rock here and here is our log and it is going to go over the rock. Now if the rock is in the middle then the full weight of the load is right here on the rock. If the rock is over on one side only one half of the load is on the rock so the middle wears faster and you get coke bottle shaped logs. And you learn eventually that the coke bottle shaped logs work better than new logs. You start getting guys with hatchets to carve the coke bottle shape into them from the beginning because that is easier than wearing them in. Because if there is a stone in the middle and your log is coke bottle shape you just go over it. You don't have to push the load over it. You just sail over it. That makes the load easier to push.

Then somebody said, 'Well, we've got all these baskets full of gravel and stuff that we also need to build the pyramid. Instead of carrying them on our backs, why don't we put them on top of the rock and push everything?' Well, that works. That's easier than carrying the gravel in a basket on your back. So they do that.

Then they have all the big rocks in place and they say, 'Gee, we really miss those big rocks because it was easier than carrying the basket. Let's make a fake rock out of wood. It won't be very heavy and we can put our baskets on it.' Okay that is easier again, so you do it.

Then somebody says, 'Well, look, suppose we have posts going right down here so that that last log can't get out.' Well, you try that and the log rubs against the post. You learn if you put the post inward where the log is coke bottle shaped it doesn't rub up as much and you can take mutton fat out of the tail of the sheep – everybody knows that makes things slippery – and grease it and then it hardly drags at all. And what you end up with is a very big, very clumsy four-wheeled cart. And this is how the wheel was invented.

If you read the anthropologists about the Indians they will tell you the Indians did not have the wheel. But they did. The thing is that the only wheel that they had was tiny little wheeled toys. A little animal on a little platform and four wheels. Obviously they did not develop the wheel. They got it from somebody who had already developed it. And this somebody could not put a big cart or chariot aboard the ship. It took up too much room. You could put a hundred little wheeled toys aboard the ship and trade them. Right? Well the Indians had never seen anything like it. 'Well, gee, that is neat. You can pull it along and it follows the kid around.' It is a nice trade item and you can carry hundreds of them aboard your Phoenician ship. But the Indians never took it any farther. They were not able to look at the wheeled toy and say, 'Why can't we make a big one like

that?’ They never took that step.

JJ: I am tempted to say there was a book a few years ago by a chemist who argued that the Pyramids in Egypt were not made of stones dragged up but they were bricks cast in place with a chemical reagent to fill it. Take a box with shells in it, pour in a reagent, and make the brick right there in place. He is saying they had the technology to do this. That we have cut these stones open and that is what they look like. And that there is no reason to believe people in the ancient world didn’t understand this. I don’t know enough to critique the thesis, of course.

GW: I don’t either. I hadn’t known of the book. It is certainly a very interesting idea. There are stones in South America that are so closely fitted that you wonder if somebody hasn’t been doing something like that. Now maybe they just very laboriously carved these stones so that they fit right into each other, but you would think they would just carve them flat like Joe blocks so they would do that but they don’t. They wave round and so forth but they fit. They key into each other nicely.

JJ: What were you regarding as the theme in *Castleview*? You told me that the castle is a Winnebago, from one perspective.

GW: From Morgan le Fay’s perspective it is a travelling home. She can send her house, her castle whatever you want to call it.

JJ: Is this a pure fantasy novel?

GW: Oh yes, I would say it is a purely fantasy novel. I was trying to show really the connection of the modern world to the medieval world more than anything else. That’s the theme.

JJ: And it has a lot to do with perception? For some people the band that runs through the town are cowboys and Indians, for others they are Arthur and his knights, for others it seems to be a spaceship.

GW: When you research these anomalous stories and accounts you get this sort of thing. You get two witnesses who have very different stories depending on how they perceived some third thing that we don’t know what it was. So I tried to show it like that.

JJ: So basically you have Arthurian characters in the modern world who are some way or other archetypes of the characters in the twentieth century characters that we see?

GW: Yes, they are twentieth century characters who are rather like the people of the middle ages. The people of the middle ages weren’t that different. And I was thinking of the old business about everybody being descendant from Charlemagne – you are and so am I. You know that if you look at the number of ancestors each of us must have had, we come up with a number by the time we get back to the time of Charlemagne that is something like eight times the actual population of Europe at that time. Europe only had something like 12 million people in Charlemagne’s time and our number of grandparents and great-grandparents doubles

with every generation. It works out to an enormous number and so anybody who was living in Europe at that time and who did in fact have descendants, and Charlemagne had something like fourteen children, is almost certainly – the almost is really a weasel word – is statistically certain to be descendant of Charlemagne.

Okay, if there really was an Arthur – and there was because he is mentioned in ancient chronicles – and he left a number of descendants, which is at least plausible, then we are probably all descended from Arthur. And what Morgan le Fay is looking for is a descendant who is a satisfactory Arthur figure for her. But not only is Wrangler descended from Arthur and Will Shields is descended from Arthur, but Bob Roberts is descended from Arthur and Ann Schindler is descended from Arthur, because we all are.

I was telling my wife I am what is called a free-lance. A real ‘free lance’ was a medieval knight who had no feudal obligations and could hire himself out. He hired his lance and you had one more lance in your heavy cavalry charge when you hired this man. You also got whatever retainers he brought along with him. But now somebody like me is called a free-lance. I work mostly for Tor Books. Tor Books is owned by St Martin’s Press. St Martin’s Press is owned by the British Macmillan Corporation, which is owned by the Macmillan family, which is headed up by the Duke of something or other who is the head of the Macmillan family, so I am really a free-lance in the employ of this Duke. Things have not changed nearly as much as we would like to think that they have and I was trying to show some of that.

JJ: Well, we have really discussed this and you have answered it because a number of reviewers assume that you are writing a modern type of novel wherein everything is a matter of perspective and it is supposed to be confusing, and somehow or other that is a profundity. But actually, the clues are there and you are not writing that type of novel. There might be puzzles, but the reader is supposed to figure them out.

GW: Yes. Everything may be confusing but that is how things are. It is not true that you can’t get through the confusion and figure out certain things that are happening. Life seen superficially has very little pattern to it. There is a lot of confusion and so forth. That doesn’t mean that you can’t learn some things about it and see things in it if you are willing to look at what is going on and think about what is going on. It seems to me this is a puzzle that we are all set.

This is one of the principal things that distinguish us from the beast. I know perfectly well that animals can reason in a very limited degree. I think that animals are self-aware. I have no question that animals are self-aware. I’m talking about higher animals, not snakes and lizards and such. But I don’t think animals are reflective. I don’t think that animals

try and make sense of things in the way that we do. The animal may be under the stars every night for all of its life, but I don't think it ever looks up at the stars and wonders what that is. I don't think that animals see anything analogous to the constellations and so forth that human beings see in the sky.

JJ: In *Free Live Free* were you pointing to inner moral freedom as the true freedom that the characters come to in a society that seems to have mysterious conspiratorial forces operating in the background of it? Or were you getting something else?

GW: I suppose in a way. One of the things that I was trying to say was that America is not free and is becoming less so. And that we have to realize it and we have to resolve within ourselves to be free and to oppose the forces that are enslaving us.

JJ: So this is really a follow on, a more mature version of *Operation Ares*?

GW: I suppose, yes. Somewhat the same concern. I tried to give the four boarders each a besetting sin. Madame Serpentina, it's pride. Candy, it's gluttony. Stubb, I forget now. Osgood Barnes, sexuality of course. Envy, envy I think is Stubbs's. And I wasn't trying to write allegory. I wasn't saying he was a personification of envy. I wanted to show men and women who were actually beset by these sins, given an opportunity to become something bigger and better than they had been by defeating the sin to some degree. Candy of course gets what she wants. She stuffs herself to the point that she can stuff herself no more, and finds that this is not really paradise, it is not heaven even though she has achieved it. Osgood Barnes comes to see sex as something more than the physical act. He comes to see the possibilities of love and sacrifice and so on. That is what I tried to do at least.

JJ: I don't want to keep you too much longer. I wanted to ask you a few questions about the Severian novels. I have tried very hard to find out, find the meaning of the word Ushas but I haven't succeeded, so would you explain. You didn't make up any words?

GW: No, but some of them are typos. Ushas is not one of them though. It is a Qabbalistic term for one of the circles of the Qabbala and I don't want to try to answer questions on the Qabbala. I never knew a great deal about it and I have forgotten most of what I knew. But to find out what it is that is the place to look. Read Qabbalic literature. I have the great disadvantage of not believing in it and so I can't get so caught up in it as Qabbalists really do. To me it was a place that I could steal ideas and names from.

I think it is a Qabbalist name for the new earth after it has been cleansed by God or some such thing, but check it out in Qabbalistic literature.

JJ: This universe that Yesod and Briah are part of: is that our universe. Or is that a universe that resurrected saints have set up in the world to come as part of the cities that they made?

GW: No. I thought of it as a long past universe. Something that we are repeating rather than something that we are.

JJ: It is a universe in which angel-like beings actually have physical control over the universal stars and suns. I noticed that you had scarabs in the great machine in Yesod. Severian goes through and sees them.

GW: Yes.

JJ: Scarabs push the suns. But that is a past world, you say.

GW: Yes, I was looking at what past universes might have been like. I began with the idea of what is going to happen to us if we just keep going the way we are going and continue to live on the continents of Earth without ever really going into the sea or going into space and we just wait for the money to run out – the do-nothing future – and thinking about what that would be like. And then I got into the idea of universal cycles. And decided that I would show that this might be a past cycle. Some physicists at least think that the Big Bang is eventually going to be followed by a Big gnaB in which the whole universe coalesces again, which will be followed by another Big Bang, sort of like a succession of universes as piston impulses in an internal combustion engine. I certainly don't have any great emotional investment in that idea, but I do think it is a useful idea to play around with. Physics is coming nearer and nearer and nearer to mysticism. It has been doing this now for over fifty years, and it seems to me that is a fascinating thing that much too little attention has been given to.

JJ: That poses something of a difficulty in terms of Christian eschatology if there is to be a time when there is a resurrection where the world comes to an end. Are you making an attempt to unify those two ideas or just to play with the idea of a 'gnostic' universe?

GW: I was toying with those ideas, I think, rather than trying to make sense of them. Is our resurrection going to be in another universal cycle? Well, yes, maybe it is. I don't know. We don't know what is really meant by the world coming to an end, and God rolling up the sky like a carpet and all that. It is all picturesque language, figurative language to try to give a general idea to an audience that would not be capable of understanding the actuality. And I am not sure we are more capable of understanding that actuality than they were. It is like the Genesis story. I don't believe in a literal 'apple' and I don't believe that literally biting into the fruit had this effect, but if you have to explain to a bunch of primitives how men differ from animals and where men went wrong in differing from animals, this is a pretty good way to do it.

JJ: Who is on trial in *The Urth of the New Sun*? Severian or Tzadkiel?

GW: Severian is really on trial. Tzadkiel is pretending to be on trial as a part of Severian's trial as I remember.

JJ: Tzadkiel means 'Righteousness of God'.

GW: He is an angel of justice.

JJ: He passes judgement there. Apheta, that would mean apheta with an *eta* that is 'speechless'. Was that your idea? Apheta with an *epsilon* could mean 'forgiveness'.

GW: No, it is 'speechless'. They talk by centering the sounds that you hear so that you think that you are hearing a voice, but they are actually speechless. In a completely silent atmosphere they would be unable to speak. It was just a physical idea that I decided to play with and it has certain philosophical resonances to it.

JJ: As if the universe of words is at one level and there is something higher or above that?

GW: Well, the idea of selection, that we can make ourselves clear to somebody else by selecting things to which they pay attention.

JJ: Okay. Severian's sexual relationship with her. What is the purpose of that? He is a married man so at one level he is cheating on his wife. He gets aboard ship and immediately takes a cabin near Gunnie and the way you have it written he thinks to himself well it has been ten years since I have had anybody since Valeria. It seems to be one of his lapses in virtue at that point.

GW: Yes, I was not trying to show him as being that virtuous a man.

JJ: But here you have an angelic being take him for the night. What is going on there? Is that an idea of a celestial marriage between heaven and earth?

GW: I think that the idea was of the higher being trying to raise the lower being to a greater height, perhaps. And also the attraction that the lower being at least properly should feel toward the higher being.

JJ: So we could interpret that more on a symbolic than a moral level?

GW: Oh yes, yes. Well, he is there to be morally judged but the fact that he is acquitted doesn't mean that everything that he does or will do is right. If that is the criteria then none of us are going to make it. None of us are without sin, which I realize is a platitude, but it is also truth and it is very important truth – you have a spider on you. If that is what we mean by good people then there are no good people. What we have to mean by good people is people who are bad but are trying at times to be good with mixed success because that is the closest that we get.

JJ: The holy slaves, Famulimus or one of them, tells Severian that he is the center of his race, the savior of his race. That is so Christ-like language you can see why interpreters would say that Severian is a Christ figure. But is there a Christ figure in the book, or is He simply for this universe?

GW: In so far as there is a Christ figure it is Severian. That doesn't mean he has to be identified with Christ. He is in a position similar to that of Christ. But really it is a different position because Christ really is both God and man. Severian is not. Severian is a Christian rather than a Christ. But

he has been taken as the representative of humanity by whom humanity is to be judged. This I think is what happened perhaps with the actual human Jesus. He is as fully human as you or I and we are saved by Him, by the fact that He passed. That the corruption did not destroy Him. I think that St Paul is absolutely correct when he says that Jesus was tempted in all the ways that we are tempted. I think that Jesus was tempted to commit murder or any other sin that you want to name just as the rest of us are. And the difference is that He did not sin.

JJ: Well, it's been two hours, and so let's leave this garden to the bugs. Thank you very much.