

Interview recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMsq9noxBOg>

[Narrator — Unnamed female voice]

The following is an interview with novelist and short story writer Gene Wolfe, conducted by Chris Merrick for the American Audio Prose Library in April of 1984, at the author's home in Barrington, Illinois, a few miles north of Chicago.

Mr. Wolfe is one of the most highly respected writers in the field of science fiction. He's won two Nebula Awards, presented by the Science Fiction Writers of America, and the Chicago Foundation for Literature Award for a mainstream novel entitled *Peace*. Mr. Wolfe recently completed a seven-year project, *The Book of the New Sun*, a four-volume series which provoked such authors as Harlan Ellison to say that Gene Wolfe "is now succeeding in writing everyone else under the table."

One reason the series took seven years to write is that Wolfe, until 1983, had a full-time job and wrote only in his spare time. Wolfe was born in 1931 and spent much of his childhood immersed in fantasy and adventure novels. He attended engineering school at Texas A&M. He, his wife Rosemary, and their family later moved to Ohio and then to Illinois, where he became a senior editor of a monthly engineering journal. He began selling stories in the early '60s and publishing novels in the '70s, writing only when he had time. "When you have only two hours a day to write," Wolfe has said, "you can write in the back of a pickup truck going down an interstate highway." But with those two hours a day, Wolfe has published eight novels, one essay collection, and four books of short stories.

[Gene Wolfe]

I discovered pulp magazines, which were just in their dying day then. I would go to the Richmond Pharmacy and get a pulp magazine: *Planet Stories* or *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, or *Weird Tales*, or my favorite, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*. I'd hide behind the candy counter and read the shortest story in the magazine as fast as I could, trying to get finished with it before the pharmacist saw me and kicked me out of the drug store. If I won—if I got finished before he saw me—I stuck the magazine back on the rack, slunk out of the drug store, and I'd come back the next day. If he won—if he caught me—he'd be on the lookout for me for another three or four days, so I had to stay away for half a week or more. If I wasn't too lucky, the magazine would go off sale and I'd never get to finish the story.

[Chris Merrick]

I'm speaking today with Mr. Gene Wolfe. He's the author of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Peace*, and *The Book of the New Sun*, among other books and short stories. I'd like to start off just by asking you some very basic questions about your background, such as: where were you born and raised, and where did you go to school?

[Gene Wolfe]

I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I wasn't raised there, and as a matter of fact my parents weren't living there when I was born—I claim to have been born by mail order. They were living in New Jersey, but we moved away very, very soon after that. My father was from Southern Ohio. Neither of my parents were native New Yorkers, or anything like it. My mother was from North Carolina. They moved around for the first ten years or so of my life. We hopped all over the country, I would say, and ended up in Houston, Texas, after a short period of living in Dallas, Texas.

I grew up, actually, in Houston, Texas. I went to Texas A&M, which is sort of like a cross between a concentration camp and a college. It was very much a military school—or it was in my day—a very military school set out in the middle of the prairie. I went there for two and a half years, flunked out of that. Dropped out of school, lost my student deferment, got drafted for the Korean War, and served in the infantry during the latter part of the Korean War. I came back, went on the GI Bill at the University of Houston, and finally graduated and got a degree.

[Chris Merrick]

Did you do a lot of reading all this time?

[Gene Wolfe]

Oh yes. I was a very sickly kid, actually. I had infantile paralysis—which I finally recovered [from] completely—but apparently that was the first in a long line of fairly minor diseases. But it kept me from being anything like the star outfielder on a baseball team. As a result, I did a lot of reading. I played a lot of chess and old board games like Monopoly.

Another part of it, actually, is that Houston, during most of the year, is extremely hot. At the time I was a kid growing up there, nobody had air-conditioned cars, nobody had air-conditioned houses. There was air conditioning, but the only places you ever find it was at the movie theaters and the big department stores. I can remember we used to go to the movies, the matinee practically every day in the hottest part of the summer—basically just to get out of the heat. My father would come out of the theater and wrap his handkerchief around his hand so he could open our car door.

When you have that kind of heat, you tend to do things that you can do indoors, in the shade, in front of an electric fan—like read, or play chess, or whatever, and so I did a great deal of it.

Neither of my parents had gone to college. I don't think either of them had anything that could reasonably be called an education, but they were both very intelligent people, and they both read a great deal, and they seemed to expect me to do it. And I did.

[Chris Merrick]

Was this adventure stories? Science fiction?

[Gene Wolfe]

It was a bit of everything. I remember my father gave me H.G. Wells' History of the World, for example. I read that. I read Oz books, and Lewis Carroll, and God knows what. I read a great many mysteries because my mother was a mystery fan, and as a result we had what in those days were twenty-five cent paperback books scattered all over the house. I read a lot of Ellery Queen, who was one of her favorites, and other mystery writers.

I started reading science fiction, actually, because I fell off my bicycle. That meant I couldn't ride my bicycle to junior high school. My mother had to take me in the car, and she came to pick me up one time, and she had The Pocket Book of Science Fiction lying on the seat of the car beside her. I didn't know it, but that was the first reprint short story anthology in paperback books of science fiction. Edited by Donald A. Wollheim, who now is a publisher—has his own publishing company.

I liked the cover, and she didn't much like the stories, so I stole the book from her, essentially. I got her to give it to me is what it came down to.

The first story—I'll never forget it—was Theodore Sturgeon's "Microcosmic God." And that, I think, was the story that hooked me. In fact, I'm certain it was.

[Chris Merrick]

I'd like to ask about some of the characters in The Book of the New Sun. Quite a few of them are what you might expect—a warrior caste, or peasants, or religious figures. But you have some odd characters that pop up, and I was wondering if you might just explain what you were thinking when you created them. I'll just throw the names out: Baldanders, the giant?

[Gene Wolfe]

Baldanders is the sort of scholar you had in the Middle Ages. He dug back into the learning of Classical times. But in his period, when he digs back into the learning of the past, he finds the physical and biological science that we're starting to develop now. He continues to dig, and at the same time, he uses the science to make improvements on his person. He's that great American hero: the self-made man—in the most literal sense.

And of course he discovers one of the givens of this series is that the way to achieve eternal physical life on Earth is to continue to grow, to remain juvenile to speak, so that the death process doesn't take over. Which gives you longer life, indeed, but which results in you becoming larger and larger, which is why Baldanders is now a giant.

[Chris Merrick]

How about Dorcas? You've said you were as surprised as Severian when she popped up out of nowhere.

[Gene Wolfe]

Yeah. And now you're asking me to explain why I invented her and put her in the book, and of course, I didn't. She put herself in the book.

You have to remember that the commerce between an author and his characters is not... the author is not a slave driver, and the characters automaton who walk and talk as he directs them to do. The characters exert their own influence on the author, and make their own demands on the story. And occasionally a character, like Dorcas, simply walks onstage, so to speak, and begins to play her own part.

At this point, it's the author's duty—or the playwright's duty—to frantically rewrite the script so that she fits into it somewhere. This is what she did. Dorcas pushed me around.

Sometimes it's rather scary. You've invested a great deal of time and effort into a book, and at some point one of your characters sits down and says, "Now look here, I'm not going to do this, Gene. This isn't me, right?" And so you're very much in the sort of situation of a movie director working with a bunch of temperamental stars, most of whom make more money than he does. After all, some of my characters are rulers, and warriors, and whatnot, and I have a tough time sitting at my desk and giving these people orders, you know. They laugh at me!

[Chris Merrick]

How about the Green Man?

[Gene Wolfe]

I put him in to show what one possible, potential solution could be to the society's problems. Because the society is losing its soil. It's exhausted its resources. In a novel like this, with time travel, it's not only reasonable for the characters to bounce around in time, as they do somewhat, but it's also reasonable for people from the far future just to come back and have a look and see what's going on.

The Green Man is one of those people, of course. The green man got trapped and put in, essentially, a medicine show, from which Severian rescues him, because he is green. What he has done—what his society has done—is take over the sort of photosynthetic process that plants use to derive energy directly from the sun, and apply it to themselves. And thus, of course, he's green because he's full of chlorophyll.

There are legends in medieval Europe of the existence of "green men" who were much closer to plants than the ordinary human beings were. And it's always struck me that one possible explanation for those green men is that they were time travelers from some future in which we'd learned to take over the plant's processes, then went back to a period in which we thought people were too unsophisticated to realize what was going on, and did a little looking around. And as a result, they show up on the edges of illuminated manuscripts, and in some very old church statuary and this sort of thing.

There were all sorts of things that were banging around the world a thousand years or so ago that we really can't explain, and we just try and sweep under the rug. People in Medieval Europe

knew that their woods were inhabited by primitives who were much more primitive than the Medieval Europeans were. We pretend they're legends, and they don't exist.

There's very considerable evidence for the existence of a very small Caucasian race in Europe during the Dark Ages. Probably a holdover from the Neolithic period. But, again, it's inconvenient for us to talk about this sort of thing, and so we pretend that fairy tales and so on that tell us about this race are just nonsense, moonshine, and so on.

Actually, people were reporting them in law courts in Scandinavia as late as the 18th century. I mean, this is sworn testimony: "who did you talk to? Who was there?" and so on. But, there's no scientific recognition, really, of these people.

They tend to cluster, more than anyplace else, about the British Isles. Britain, Scotland, Ireland are all famous for constant fairy tales. The little people. But we pretend it's all moonshine, and that they had wings like dragonflies, and were about three inches high. Actually, "elves" were an "ell" high, that was why they were called "elves". They were approximately 40 inches high. That was what an ell was: it was the length of a war arrow, or the distance from the bowman's outstretched hand, that held the bow, to his ear, which was where he pulled the arrow.

I think there's a great deal more in the past than we are willing to recognize, because it's inconvenient. It's disturbing for us. And the corollary is: there will be much more in the future than we are willing to recognize now.

Occasionally I get bitterly criticized for not predicting the sort of futures that people feel are real, and inevitable, and certain to come about, and consequently I am a bad man. I don't think that the whole future is going to consist of better and better machines, and more and more plastic. Which is what they would like to think that it's going to consist of. If I look at the kind of people that they are, and put them somewhere in the past, and have them predict what the future would be like, I see that our present is nowhere near like this prediction.

Look at what people in the 19th century say—oh, 1850 or so—thought that our life was going to be like now, and you'll find that they were very, very far off the mark. They thought that the industrial age was going to get more and more industrial. Steam was going to be used for everything, I assume to the point that eventually we would have steam spaceships and so on. And it hasn't worked like that.

I like steam airplanes myself, which I try and stick in here and there. The idea of somebody on an airplane, shoveling coal into the boiler as the thing goes along, appeals to me. But, it hasn't really happened.

[Chris Merrick]

Well, that brings up an interesting idea though, about the future of the human race. I think you're interested in it. You seem to be positive about the human race evolving, and perhaps rather than becoming more technological, becoming more human, or more compassionate.

[Gene Wolfe]

I think it's already very obvious that if that doesn't happen, we're headed toward extinction. Now, we may very well be headed toward extinction, but as more and more power is put into the hands of people, the people are going to have to become more compassionate—more human, more humane—or they're going to kill each other off.

Suppose that you went back to the dark ages, when you had wandering war bands, and various barbaric tribes and so on, and you gave all of those people machine guns. Europe would soon be pretty well uninhabited. And we've already got the future machine guns, more and more of them. Not only nuclear weapons, although that's the most obvious example. But, high energy beams: lasers, masers, and so on. Biological weapons, and whatnot.

We're not going to be able to tolerate, forever, a world in which little bands of terrorists go around planting car bombs, because the car bombs are going to become more and more destructive.

[Chris Merrick]

Let's turn to that.

The Book of the New Sun features four books: The Shadow of the Torturer, The Claw of the Conciliator, The Sword of the Lictor, and The Citadel of the Autarch. All of them combined were around 1,100 pages. You've said it took you seven years to write that series. I'd like to ask: what started you on a project that large?

[Gene Wolfe]

I feel that when a writer starts, he should know the ending. He should know about what the story is going to look like when he begins. Otherwise, he's going to have a lot of problems along the way. I started out to write a novelette or a novella, and it got completely out of hand. It kept going and going and going.

In those days, Damon Knight was publishing an original anthology called Orbit. This was intended as a submission to that anthology. I figured 20,000 words or so; something along those lines.

I wrote the 20,000 words and realized I'd only just barely begun the story with the 20,000 words. So I thought, "Well, I've got a novel on my hands. I'll do it as a novel." I wrote another 100,000 words, and realized that after that 100,000 words, I had the now well under way.

So, I decided I had a trilogy. Trilogies were fairly fashionable in those days. So, I kept writing, finally ended the thing with three books (which is what a trilogy is supposed to have). I laid the three stacks of manuscripts side-by-side, and discovered that the last stack was about twice as long as the first two.

I decided I had a tetralogy. Fortunately, I was able to find a publisher who agreed with me—or, an editor, I should say, who agreed with me.

[Chris Merrick]

What was the germ of the story, then? You have the main character, Severian, and what did you want to do with him, that you went from a 20,000 word novella to an 1100 page tetralogy?

[Gene Wolfe]

Essentially I wanted to write a book about something who wasn't Captain Ransom: someone who was different from the sympathetic hero or central figure that you usually get. I wanted to take somebody who was normally labeled as being one of the bad guys, and do a story from his side of it.

Severian is a professional torturer.

I got the torturer idea while sitting in a program on costuming. I started sulking, as I listened to the various participants in the program, that no one had ever done any of my characters as a masquerader.

I started thinking: what characters have I done that they should be doing, and would do if they weren't cheating me out of my just desserts, and so on. I realized I hadn't done many characters who would go over well in a masquerade.

So, sitting there, I made one up. I got the torturer's outfit—the black cloak, black trousers, bare chest, black boots, and so on—and from what they told me on the panel, I knew that would be an easy costume to do. I thought: what can I do with this man, this torturer that I would like to use.

I started thinking about him. I began to think about what kind of life somebody who was a professional torturer might have, either in the past or in the future.

Pretty soon, I saw that there was a story there. It's the story of a boy who starts as an apprentice torturer, becomes a journeyman torturer, who actually performs tortures (while he's an apprentice, he does things like sweep floors and run with messages) and who commits a sin of mercy, permitting one of the clients of his guild to get off with somewhat less pain than she was intended to suffer, and is exiled for it. He goes into exile, becomes involved in a war that his country is fighting, and ends up as the ruler of his nation, the Commonwealth.

That's the story of the tetralogy. The tetralogy was written with the idea of showing his rise from the ragged apprentice boy to the throne that he occupies at the end.

And I'm now working on a fifth book, which I call a coda to the tetralogy, in which Severian brings a new sun to his planetary system. Which the system needs: the old sun is dying, it's gradually cooling off. And, as a result, the world is entering a new ice age, which will be a terminal ice age eventually, if nothing is done.

The fifth book will be about how something is done.

[Chris Merrick]

I'd like to talk a bit about mythology and Christianity in the book. Probably the easier place to start would be mythology. You have a few things which remind me of Greek myth: one, he's on a quest, he's traveling. At one point, he is thrown into a large, underground prison, an immense one. It's so huge, it struck me as being an underworld. Were you thinking of a Greek myth, or other mythology, when you had him embark on his quest?

[Gene Wolfe]

A lot of the background for *The Book of the New Sun* was taken from Byzantium. The Byzantine Empire was what the Roman Empire became called when it became more Greek, really, than Roman. A good deal of the "furniture," of the *Book of the New Sun*, has been borrowed from Byzantium.

People who read it without much historical background generally seem to feel that I'm talking about Medieval Europe. It's because come across the word "guild" and they seem to think that that indicates they're in Medieval Europe and nowhere else. But actually, if they thought of the Near East, the late period of the Roman Empire, they'd be a lot closer.

Obviously, there is a Greek "feeling" to it. Greek mythology comes into it, perhaps, somewhat. There is a Christian feeling, because at that time the Roman empire was a Christian empire, and it was essentially that Christian empire which was destroyed by the Turks, and whose destruction caused what we call the Dark Ages, and so on, in Christianity.

[Chris Merrick]

From the point of view of a Christian, Severian begins his life as someone who inflicts pain. And yet, at the end of the book, he's gone through his trials, so to speak, and has now renounced torture. He's become, I guess, a redeemer figure. You've written that you thought Christ, also, knew what it was like to be a torturer. That he used the whip. I was wondering: were you thinking of that when you created Severian?

[Gene Wolfe]

I was certainly thinking of the relationship of pain to human life, which is one of the very central relationships. One of the pivots. And if you're going to take a torturer as a hero, it seems to me that if you're going to do that, and if you're going to try and write a good book, you have to think of such things as that all human beings suffer some pain—usually considerable pain—in the part of a lifetime. And what the pain is good for, what it's not good for, what our avoidance (or attempts to avoid it) draw us into.

[Chris Merrick]

You use a couple of major symbols. One is the that roses are kind of a growth symbol. You use the sun—of course, it's The Book of the New Sun—and there is a mythical figure called the Conciliator, who will bring a new sun.

These are great symbols. Is Severian a Christian figure, or a Christ figure, or is Severian a Gnostic figure?

[Gene Wolfe]

I suppose he's both. I think that if a Christ figure is to suffer the kinds of things that mankind suffers, than one of the things that he has to suffer is doubt. Because, if there is no doubt, there is no faith.

You can't talk about faith when you're talking about something that you are certain of. Faith is the individual's commitment to what he is not certain of.

So, in that sense, certainly—pardon me, that's badly phrased, isn't it?

Severian is agnostic, yes, but at the same time he is a savior figure, and a Christ figure.

[Chris Merrick]

I'd like to turn to another book which represents a different way of presenting your feelings on that matter, which is The Fifth Head of Cerberus.

You mentioned H.G. Wells, and it reminded me, in the beginning, very much of The Island of Doctor Moreau. There's kind of a Florentine civilization on this other planet, a very Baroque, slow-paced society. And yet, underneath, there's a lot of activity going on, in terms of people trying to advance the human race.

The main character turns out to be a clone of his father, who was also a clone. So, somewhere in the past, someone decided to try to improve or prolong his own life through his descendants.

You have surgical techniques used on human beings. If you're a fighting slave, there's a man with four arms. You have this actual physical restructuring of human beings.

You have aborigines who have a mimicking ability, and they may be so successful at mimicry that they've assimilated the human race.

And all this, to me, is wrapped around the idea of evolution of the human race. That people are looking to improve or advance the human race through evolution. Yet, all this is presented kind of negatively: it's not a real pleasant place to live, this city. Some of the experiences that the man has as he's growing up are fairly ugly.

Are you making a comment there, in terms of evolution?

[Gene Wolfe]

Well, certainly I'm saying that those principles, those methods, are going to be used by individuals for what they conceive as their individual benefit. And, as you said, the results are going to be kind of ugly.

Number Five's father is not trying to improve the human race, he's trying to improve himself, and prolong himself. He's essentially a character very similar to Baldanders, although he doesn't become a giant. He doesn't grow. But his idea is to use biological science to prolong his image by cloning himself. He wants to eventually take over his civilization. He doesn't. He fails to do that, and his constant questioning of Number Five is a part of his attempt to determine why he fails.

The aborigines are something different, and to one side. We may meet in space something, as you say, capable of mimicking, to the point of displacing individual human beings. That may happen.

I suppose it's a metaphor, if you like, for cultural assimilation. The Romans conquered the Greeks, but they ended up by becoming Greeks, and stopping being Romans, as they themselves knew that that [sic] was happening while it did. That's why the Byzantine empire, which we were talking about a while back, is basically more Greek than Roman.

[Chris Merrick]

The Book of the New Sun is more of what I see as a creationist point of view. You have a redeemer figure who will lead the human race into a rebirth. And yet The Fifth Head of Cerberus is more that the human race [is] taking matters into its own hands, and evolving itself—by force if necessary—into a better position.

How do you feel about the difference between creation and evolution? You're using both of them.

[Gene Wolfe]

I think they're words. And they really represent two opposed philosophies, and not two different sets of facts. Both of them are working with the same facts; or at least they should be. They're seeing those things differently. The evolutionists see it as an automatic process. The creationists see it as specifically the act of God. It seems to me that there's a great deal of truth in both viewpoints, and that the things they're really quarreling about are not those things.

God does not work by reaching down a great hand and touching somebody on the forehead, and saying "you used to be an ape, but no more." So, whether you want to take that as the automatic process, or the will of God, is mostly a matter of viewpoint.

I'm coming to grips with this, but when people have no idea of space—they never got into the void—then air was always, and need not necessarily be there. Air didn't help for anything,

because it was always there. On the other hand, it was always there. And it seems to me that God, for us, is like that: he is always there.

What we're really talking about here is not how God thinks about us, but how we think about God. And using those in various places.

The people in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* are automatic process people. The people in *The Book of the New Sun* are much more God-centered people. They see the coming of the New Sun as the coming of a savior. They see something happening to save them by the interference of a higher power.

This is a matter of how do you look at it.

Severian has not been handed a prophet's license. If he is a savior figure, then he is a savior figure because he saves, not because he's been told to save.

Of course, that's the idea of faith: they have no way of knowing that it will happen, and all they can do is hang on. Just as the Jews, for example, have hung on—for what, 5000 years?—waiting for the messiah.

We have to remember in all these things that we're talking about stories. We're not talking about somebody's text in philosophy. Again, I say that we take a certain direction, and we say "where will this go? What kind of society evolves from this type of thought, combined with this type of technology?"

In *The Book of the New Sun*, we have very definitely a collapsed civilization. A civilization that used to travel to the stars and no longer does.

In *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, the collapse hasn't been so noticeable, but the society has stagnated, just as Number Five's line—his father, and so on, back to Mr. Million—have stagnated. And it's a stagnating society.

[Chris Merrick]

I'd like to turn to another book you wrote, which is called *Peace*. It's not science fiction or fantasy, it's what I would call a Midwestern Gothic. I don't know if you're comfortable with that term, but when I read it was thinking of books like *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury, or Truman Capote's childhood memoirs of this man who's lived in one town all his life, and he's writing about the stories he knows, the people he's lived with.

I was wondering: where did the idea for *Peace* come from?

[Gene Wolfe]

[Inaudible]

[Chris Merrick]

Is it autobiographical in any sense?

[Gene Wolfe]

Yes, it has some autobiographical elements. I think anything that a writer writes has some autobiographical elements.

It's a small town story. I think Cassionsville, which is the town in Peace, is very similar to Logan, Ohio, which is where my father grew up. Where I went to visit my grandparents. But beyond that, I can't tell you quite what the origin of the book was.

[Chris Merrick]

Were there real people that you drew upon? An Aunt Olivia, or Uncle Julius?

[Gene Wolfe]

I think that you always draw on real people. Usually, you take elements from several people, and combine them to create a new character. It's very hard to do a character who is like no one that you've ever known.

[Chris Merrick]

How about Mr. Gold? Did you ever know someone who did the things he did?

[Gene Wolfe]

No, I've never known a person who faked books.

I anticipated The Hitler Diaries, which kind of amuses me, with Mr. Gold. It simply seems to me to be a branch of crime that nobody had really gone into, because it's so difficult.

By the way, I pulled him out for a book that's about to be published by a small press now, called Bibliomen. A book about book people. Mr. Gold is definitely a book person, and he has forged some of the stories in Bibliomen. We get to see a little bit more of his handiwork there.

I thought of a man who would do for books the sort of thing that Zelig does for himself in the Woody Allen movie. Of course, that movie hadn't been made when I thought of it. I did have a lot of fun with Gold.

Part of it, of course, was from the Necronomicon, and the other books we talk about in science fiction and fantasy, that don't actually exist. The Cult of the Ghouls, which was August Derleth's nonexistent book, and so on.

[Chris Merrick]

Would you consider the book a fantasy?

[Gene Wolfe]

I think that any piece of fiction is a fantasy. The question is whether or not it's willing to admit it. Peace is probably a little bit more willing to admit it than, oh, something like Henderson the Rain King.

[Chris Merrick]

One of the eerie elements in the book is that Alden Dennis Weir has this house he lives in, which he's apparently built replicas of all the rooms he's lived in all his life.

A friend of mine mentioned Edgar Allen Poe as doing something similar to that in stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher". The idea that there's an actual, physical world as a symbol for what he's thinking of. Were you thinking of Edgar Allen Poe, or have you ever used him as a model?

[Gene Wolfe]

The house is Weir's life. It's a metaphor for his life. He is exploring the various rooms, the times, the periods in which he lived.

I don't think I've ever consciously imitated Poe; I may have unconsciously imitated Poe.

I went to Edgar Allen Poe Elementary School, which meant that I had to read things like "The Masque of the Red Death" in fifth grade. I think that school has probably turned out generations of weirdos, of whom I am one.

[Chris Merrick]

Another thing you do, that I perceive in your writing, is: to put together a short story, you do a lot of rough draft writing of the entire world, or society, or how a person is. Then, in the final copy, you are sort of skimming in to a section of their life or their world.

[Gene Wolfe]

I think you've got to know who the characters are. Where did they come from? What kind of world did they grow up in? How are they going to react?

If you don't understand that about your characters, I don't think you have any business to write about them.

[Chris Merrick]

Do you rework a lot? Revise a lot?

[Gene Wolfe]

Yeah. I probably do... oh... four drafts of most of my material, which seems to be about right—for me anyway.

I'm tempted to do the S.J. Perelman thing. Someone asked him how many drafts he did, he said "73". He said "I used to do only about 64, but it was rough. Then I tried 81, but there was a lapidary effect: everything was too mannered. I think maybe 73 is the right number for me."

Between three and four drafts seems to be about the right number for me.

If there's something in a draft that isn't contributing to the story, then I should cut it out. I won't say that I always do, because sometimes I read my published material, and I see parts in there that I should have blue pencilled. But that is what the author is supposed to do: the author is supposed to prune the thing down to where only those parts that are bearing story weight are in the story when it reaches the reader.

[Chris Merrick]

That brings up a question which one critic mentioned about you, in terms of clarity versus ambiguity. In the afterward to *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, Pamela Sargent says "a great deal of science fiction seeks clarity rather than ambiguity," and she mentions some examples in that book. I think, once again, you create a lot of background material, and you skim into it and present us with part of a person's life, or the world they perceive in the course of the story.

Do you feel that you're an ambiguous writer?

[Gene Wolfe]

I think I am, often, because I want to be. I think the writer should be clear when he wants to be clear, he should be ambiguous when he wishes to be ambiguous. But there's a great deal of ambiguity in life, and if the idea of art is to hold up a mirror to life, then you're going to get a great deal of ambiguity out of that art.

The problem, or the writing flaw [inaudible], is when the material is ambiguous when the author doesn't want it to be. The clarity thing is the engineer school of writing, in which you often have an engineer hero, and everything is logically worked out. The book usually begins with a 10- or 20-page lump, in which the author explains the society, which is usually boring—both the explanation and the society!

In my opinion, 99 times out of 100, the society is much too simplistic. So, I don't do those things. I take the society—which I try to make reasonably complex, as complex as it would naturally be—and let my characters reveal that society as they go through the story.

[Chris Merrick]

When did you begin writing, yourself?

[Gene Wolfe]

Depends on what you mean by "begin". When I was at Texas A&M, I had a roommate who was doing illustrations for what was supposed to be the college literary magazine. He thought it

would be nice if I wrote stories that he could illustrate. So, I started, in that sense, while I was at A&M.

Then, after I'd gotten out of the Army and gone back to school—done another two years in college and all that—my wife and I were living in an 'appointed', furnished apartment, a place that was actually a padded attic with some furniture in it. We wanted very much to get out of there, but we couldn't because we didn't have any money to put up a down payment on furniture, so we could rent an unfurnished place. Furnished places are very hard to find. I thought "maybe I can write something, and sell it, and make a little money on the side."

So, I tried to do that, and after a long time it turned out I was right. But before I'd ever sold anything, we were out of that apartment. The whole reason for writing had passed by, but I continued to write anyway, I guess out of habit.

[Chris Merrick]

Was this science fiction, or any other form of fiction, or nonfiction?

[Gene Wolfe]

It was all fiction. I've never really tried to write genre. I write whatever I think is a good story, and I let other people worry about which pigeon hole it goes into.

[Chris Merrick]

I'm curious about pigeon-holing, because that does happen. You've written books like *The Devil in a Forest*, which I would call it a historical fiction. Or, a book called *Peace*, which is kind of a fictional memoir of growing up in the early twentieth century. But, you go into the bookstore now, and *Peace* has got the word 'Fantasy' stamped on the spine, and it's filed away. Does that bother you?

[Gene Wolfe]

No, not in the least. I think that I have maybe a little more feeling for what publishers have to content with than some writers do, and I realize that the publisher is essentially trying to market the book in the way that he believes, at least, will permit him to make the most money he can out of the book. And that's fine with me; I think that he should do that.

[Chris Merrick]

A lot of science fiction writers complain about being, quote, ghettoized, both in terms of (say) respect for their craft, and literally in terms of finances.

[Gene Wolfe]

In the first place, I don't that think writers should be respected. It spoils them, makes them hard to get along with, like children who've been kept up too late.

As far as finances are concerned, I don't think that the type of book has very much at all to do with how big the advances are. And that's what we're talking about, the size of the advances.

Much, much more depends on what the writer's track record is. Robert A. Heinlein can sell a novel for a million dollars, because he has a marvelous track record. What he writes is the definition of science fiction. It's science fiction if it's something like the work of Robert A. Heinlein.

So, I can't say that the science fiction ghetto is penalizing him, or penalizing Isaac Asimov, or anyone of that sort.

But the thing that you have to realize is that the writer's real money depends on the amount of royalties the book earns.

[Chris Merrick]

You've been writing since the late 50s, and for at least the last 15 years or so, you've been editing a monthly engineering magazine. You've mentioned that you have a limited amount of time to write. You said "a writer who has two hours a day to write can write in a pickup truck on the back of an interstate [sic]".

And yet, you're making the plunge into full-time writing. A lot of writers make a living as English teachers, for example, and you've been an editor. What prompted you to give all that up, and go into the risky world of being a full-time writer?

[Gene Wolfe]

If I had wanted to, I could have continued to work on Plant Engineering. It wasn't what I wanted to do.

I don't mean that I didn't enjoy it while I did it. I did. It was very hard to leave, because I was leaving behind a dozen or so very good friends, people I had worked with for years. But what I want to do is to write things like *Peace*, and *The Shadow of the Torturer*, and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, and not to write articles about hydraulic power packages. Although I did write some robot articles for *Plant Engineering* that interested me.

Of course, before I was an editor, I was an engineer. I got out of that, essentially, because I got tired of it. It wasn't really what I wanted to do, and editing was more like it.

[Chris Merrick]

One of the offshoots of the popularity of *The Book of the New Sun* was a book called *The Castle of the Otter*. I was wondering if you would tell us how that book came about.

[Gene Wolfe]

There's a newsletter called *Locus*, published for people who are interested in Science Fiction. I was in the Bay Area, and was interviewed by Charles N. Brown, who is the editor and publisher of *Locus*, and I told him in a taped interview in a noisy restaurant, that I was working on *The Citadel of the Autarch*. When he published the article, the title appeared as *The Castle of the*

Otter. I thought "that's a very nice title! I'll just do a little book that will have that title, and then Charlie will be proved to be a reliable prophet."

About that time, Mark Ziesing, who owns a bookstore up in Connecticut, asked me if I wanted to do a small press book. I said "sure, why not? I'll do The Castle of the Otter." And so I wrote The Castle of the Otter.

[Chris Merrick]

Well, speaking of the Ziesing Press, you have this kind of quirky book called The Castle of the Otter. A book about a book. You also have other small press books out, such as Plan(e)t Engineering.

That's something which seems to be happening a lot in the science fiction world. Suddenly there's these \$30 deluxe hardbacks, with acid-free paper and sewn bindings. They print a limited edition, and all the Gene Wolfe fans will snap it up. Do you make any money out of that?

[Gene Wolfe]

Oh, certainly! Certainly. I wouldn't do it if I didn't.

There aren't many copies published, but as you pointed out. Books tend to be expensive. Plus, there's always the possibility that the book may be sold again after the limited edition, and reach a larger audience. The Castle of the Otter became an offering from The Science Fiction Book Club, where as Mark Ziesing had done 520 copies, The Science Fiction Book Club did I don't know how many thousands. It has proved to be a much better investment of time than I thought it was when I was writing it.

[Chris Merrick]

What are you working on now?

[Gene Wolfe]

Oh boy, you really opened a can of worms with that one! Because I have four projects going.

There is a book called Free Live Free, which I'm making the final revisions on. That is kind of a borderline science fiction novel, laid in the present.

I'm working on The Urth of the New Sun, which is the fifth book I talked about—the coda to The Book of the New Sun. That's about midway in second draft.

I'm doing the first draft of a sort of fantasy adventure laid in ancient Greece, called Soldier of the Mist.

And I am supposed to be writing an opera based on The Death of Doctor Island, which is not the story that I read [sic], but a different story in which the music will be composed by [inaudible]. I'm supposed to be writing the libretto.

I'm going to be guest of honor at the World Science Fiction Convention in Australia in 1985. We're hoping to put on, if not the entire opera, at least some scenes from the opera, in conjunction with World Science Fiction Convention.

[Chris Merrick]

In volume one of *The Book of the New Sun*, Severian enters the great library, and runs into the master librarian, who says: "a child eventually discovers, on some low but obscure shelf, the Book of Gold. You've never seen this book, and you will never see it being past the age at which it is met."

Essentially, the Book of Gold is the one book, the treasure book that each child will find, and read, and remember for the rest of their life. Do you have a Book of Gold?

[Gene Wolfe]

I'm sure I do, but I can't remember what it is. Not right now, not right off. It was probably one of L. Frank Baum's Oz books, and not *The Wizard of Oz*. Something like *The Road to Oz*.

But I'm no longer sure just what the Book of Gold is. I think maybe that's one of the reasons why we can't go back and find it when we grow old.

[Chris Merrick]

Thanks very much.

[Gene Wolfe]

Well, thank you.