

Gene Wolfe at WorldCon (a report)

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 06 Sep 2002, 23:45

It was mid-afternoon on Thursday when I arrived at ConJose. (As it turned out, Gene Wolfe's first panel of the con was on "Working with Damon Knight" and it was Thursday at 1 -- I missed it, alas!) I went through registration, then made my first pass of the dealers' room, ran into an old friend from high school, made a second tour of the dealers' room, and went to a panel that my friend was going to see.

After that panel, through a silly series of events, I was separated from my friend and his group of Clarion-West grads, so I gravitated back down the concourse of the convention center toward the dealers' room.

A bald guy was briskly going along--did he pass me? There are a number of bald guys at the con, but this one had a cane, too, and that mustache . . .

"There you are!" I said, hurrying to catch up. "Gene Wolfe!"

He looked over and said hi, explained he was getting coffee for his wife Rosemary who was watching a panel. So we went over to the coffee cart, bought hot beverages, and then hurried back to the panel about Tolkien's status in the 21st century, where we sat in the front row. We traded whispered comments and winks during the panel; Gene stood up to make a few comments in the audience participation part of the show. Then it was all over and we left together.

Gene told me he was working on a mermaid story called, iirc, "Black Shoes." (This explained why he was so quick to comment to me about mistakes about mermaids uttered by one of the panelists.)

With her own cane Rosemary was walking around everywhere, not a wheelchair or scooter in sight, and I gathered that the scooters were all taken by the time the Wolfes . . . what, exactly? Pre-registered? (They pre-registered before I did.) Arrived? (Certainly not: they arrived a day early.) In any event, they did not have one for her and it seemed like an inconvenience that they were working around. (I regret I did not think more about it until the con was over: I said to myself, "Who do I have to kill to get a scooter?" And once I thought that joke, real potential non-murderous solutions began to occur to me, but by then it was too late.)

So we walked down the concourse. Gene said something about his two panels on Friday being back to back or something, and I didn't really get it at the time because one was to be at 11:30 and the other at 1:00. Rosemary opened a box and handed me a photocopy of the Washington Post "Master of the Universe" piece by Nick Gevers, from a stack of copies: she is very proud. (Later on Gene asked me if I'd ever met Nick in person and I said no; Gene wonders if Nick will come to the USA sometime soon, and hopes he will, because he would sure like to meet him.)

I said goodbye when they took the elevator down to the parking garage (Gene driving her back

to their hotel, whichever one it was--well it wasn't the Hilton, which is connected to the convention center.).

Then I wandered around, had dinner at an hour late for me, took the trolley back to the hotel, stayed up even later watching cable tv (I don't have cable). So I only got about 5 hours sleep (bad!).

Friday morning I had breakfast, took the trolley downtown, got off at the Fairmont Hotel because I wanted to find the con suite, and it was said to be on the 20th floor. (Open snack area, hanging out place, free beverages, etc.) Just as a part of my slow orientation, since I had not managed to do it the day before.

I walked into the hotel and there was Gene Wolfe, waiting to talk to the concierge about how to phone into the hotel from outside. Turns out that Rosemary had not slept during the night and was now taking a nap, while Gene had to go to his functions (the kaffee klatch and the panel). I asked if he would be going to the Winchester Mystery House, since the con-organized tour was that day and the only thing I had planned aside from the Wolfe kaffee and most of the panel: he said no. Which made sense, since it would overlap a bit with the panel (as well as the fact that Rosemary couldn't go).

We walked over to the Hilton, found the Green Room. They did not have the name plates for the afternoon panel, it was too early: check at Con Ops. (Oh, and by the way, most of those panelists aren't actually at the con, so it will be just Gene and one other.) Con Ops was only the next door down. Gene got the name plates and we left the Hilton.

After we scouted out the locations of the kaffee klatch and the panel, we went through the art show. There a young married couple from Southern California (I thought I could find their names in the con directory but I failed) said hi to Gene and said that when they tried to sign up for the kaffee klatch the day before it was already full. ("Ooops," I said to myself. "I didn't know there was a sign-up sheet! Oh well, I'll just wait outside.") Then there was talk of cats and dogs; their cat that can say "No," and Gene saw a tape of a talking dog; tales of dogs at the Wolfe house, past and present. Dog intelligence: how Gene's dog Dilly could climb the wire fence and get out of the yard but could never learn how to climb back in; experiments with dogs in mazes.

Then we said goodbye to them and ended up going into the huckster room. Gene said his cane was a defensive cane; and he acted out defending himself against Rosemary's cane. Which led us to talk about swords: I told my sword story and then Gene asked permission to give his mini-lecture on sword forging (Scandinavian, Arabic, and Japanese) and I said yes, by all means. So he did and it was fun; it also had direct bearing on what I'd been telling him, fwiw.

We went to the klatch area, where Larry Niven was still in place. I met a guy sitting at the table outside the room who told me he was on the waiting list in case a klatch participant did not show. His name was Mike Myers (not the actor). I said I'd wait with him. He said that the man behind LEXICON URTHUS should not be on standby but get automatic admission; I was flattered and amused. I wondered aloud why there would be a list at all; he told me that a klatch implied intimacy, small numbers, that sort of thing.

Larry Niven came out and was buffeted by Gene's snappy repartee. Both genre giants went into the room, I stayed out with Mike Myers and talked about the rising market price of the Lexicon, and about Joan Gordon's book. The Niven crowd was filing out, the Wolfe crowd was going in (I didn't recognize any names or faces, but in fact I'm pretty sure I'd exchanged email notes with Mike Myers before, so if I can't talk to people I'm not likely to make the connection).

Larry Niven came out again and said, "Gene wants to talk to the guy in the dog shirt." That was me, and it was pretty funny. Then Gene told the official to let in all the others on the waiting list, which was really funny, too, but I'm getting bogged down here. The total audience was around 12 or 15 people.

Talk went along these subjects:

PRINGLES (the truth that Gene did work on the project; the manufacturing process; that the things are best and most addicting when they are straight out of the machine and still warm) TEXAS (including, but not limited to, the way that the zoo catches rattlesnakes to trade with other zoos around the world -- a barter system for animals, or "How many rattlers for a panda?" -- whereas the common citizens are more interested in killing the snakes; various ways to kill rattle snakes, eschewing the ridiculous special guns and/or ammo . . .) THE KOREAN WAR (how he really thought he would get a safe clerical job all the way up until the day the train stopped and he could hear artillery fire and realized that he was already at the front) THE SOLDIER SERIES (the task of writing it was not as easy as he had originally envisioned, because the classical world is so alien and unknown to non-classicists; the daily life of the ancient Greeks, by way of how different their ways were from ours) THE NEW COLLECTION (two proposed titles, the second one ["Innocence Abroad"] supposed to be an easy reject to bolster the case for the first) TRUE SUPERNATURAL EXPERIENCES (he said he's had five or six, iirc, but there are two he will not speak about -- he told us one about a Chinese shop he entered one day that was not there the next day, a scenario someone else immediately recognized from THERE ARE DOORS . . .) THE SHORT SUN (talk about Horn compared with Severian and Silk; Gene talked about Sinew and Gene's younger son)

There was a redheaded woman there who had just started reading Wolfe, was in fact only just starting CLAW, and already she was in a debate with her Wolfe-reading friend about how Severian does not actually torture anybody in SHADOW.

I think the audience all took a surprised breath and looked upon this woman as something as unexpected and precious as the first snowflake of winter. I mean, here we were charging over the entire body of Gene's work, comparing this novel and that series, seeing the parallel in this life experience and that novel, and here was this one reader who had only just started reading the stuff and yet already she was debating with other readers and furthermore she was interested enough in Gene Wolfe to go to the klatch.

Anyway, there were noises about "spoilers" being made, but Gene laughed and said he'd go ahead and spoil it, so there was talk of torture and executions for a while.

By the time the klatch was over I was ravenously hungry. I asked Gene if he wasn't starving, he said he'd like some coffee if I could bring it to him at the panel (there was actually no coffee at the klatch, which was a pretty funny story, too, but I'll have to avoid it for the moment). So he headed for the panel and I headed for the same coffee stand we'd used the day before. But where was there any =food=? Nowhere. I got coffee for Gene and a banana-nut muffin for myself, then hurried to the panel.

The panel itself was pretty interesting, even though there were only the two panelists. I was dying of hunger, though, as expected the large muffin didn't even make a dent. At around 2 o'clock, in addition to headache inducing hunger, I was also trying to remember something about 2 o'clock. Wasn't there something? A panel? No, it was the Winchester Mystery House tour! So I left the panel and went to where the Tour tickets were being sold before, yet the sign was down. I knew that the bus would leave at 2:30, but first and foremost I had to get food, so I

put aside thoughts of the tour and focused on food. I saw a woman eating a sandwich and I asked her where she got it: she told me it was the counter at the back of Exhibit Hall 2. I rushed over there and discovered that the package sandwich lunches were all gone except for the ham ones. I really didn't want ham, but I ended up paying \$6 for the package.

I wandered back out onto the concourse and there was Gene, the panel was over. I explained about having run out to miss the tour and get some food. He asked me if I would have lunch with him and Rosemary; we both looked at the package in my hand and he said maybe another time. I threw away the sandwich, put the chips in my backpack, drank the lemonade, and we walked over to the Fairmount.

We ate at one of the restaurants in the hotel. Gene told Rosemary that he had run into me in the men's rest room: that he had opened a stall door and there I was; so then he backed out and tried the next stall, and there I was again; and how he still couldn't figure out how I did that part. We talked about dogs again, I think. We talked about their trip to San Jose, which Gene had earlier described as hellish, and now I heard about the "food on the road" aspect of it. Our waiter had an accent: Gene asked me where I thought the guy was from. Rosemary said Greece, I said Northern Europe, Gene said Poland. Gene asked him later and he was from Austria. We talked about teas. I praised Celestial Seasonings for nearly all of their teas except for their green tea, which just isn't as good as Lipton's green tea, and in fact is pretty bad. Gene said he drinks Lipton's green tea, and Rosemary showed me her Celestial Seasonings tin (these "Sucrets tin"-sized things that they give away in their tea boxes), which had one CS tea bag (Spearmint) left in it.

After the meal was done we said our goodbyes. I took the trolley back to my hotel and was in bed by 8:30.

The next day I was under the weather and didn't get out until late afternoon, so I missed Gene's panel on Religion and Fantasy at 4:00. Well, I saw part of it, but I was on this quest for a banana and dared not be distracted: I started at the con suite (yes, I finally got to the con suite, 30 hours after my first attempt), then tried the fan lounge, then that food counter over at Exhibit Hall 2, and so on. There was a huge street festival going on a block away from the convention center, and among those booths I found a crepe-making place with bananas and I pressured them into selling me one.

Saturday was pretty much a wash.

On Sunday I saw the Wolfes in the dealers' room. One dealer-woman said she was so glad to see Rosemary up and about, since Gene had been "stagging" around. Rosemary said what? Gene said "I wasn't staggering!" The dealer said, "He was trying to pick up women!" Rosemary threatened Gene with her cane as he stated that the women who allowed him to pick them up were sadly too heavy for him to carry.

I helped them find some things they were looking for and then wandered off.

I looked for them on Monday but I didn't find them.

So that is pretty much it, in a nutshell!

=mantis=