

Gene Wolfe Chat

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 04 Apr 2003

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James Wynn — 04 Apr 2003, 16:01

The following is the text of the Gene Wolfe Chat on Sci-Fi.com last night. I've edited it for readability:

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*** Topic for #auditorium: Chat w/ master science fiction writer Gene Wolfe 9PM ET

ChatMod:

Hi everybody, thanks for joining us. I'm Ben Trumble for SCIFI.

Gene Wolfe began writing science fiction in the 1950s and sold his first story, "The Dead Man," to Sir in 1965. Since then he's written over 20 novels and nearly 250 short stories.

From his Nebula Award-winning The Island of Dr. Death and Other Stories to his acclaimed Sun series to his numerous short stories. Along the way he's earned a reputation as perhaps the best living writer of literary science fiction. Brief word about the drill. This is a moderated chat -- please send your questions for our guest to ChatMod, as private messages.

SFExplorer:

Will there ever be another Sun series?

GeneWolfe:

I don't plan one at this time. But never is a long time and I CAN'T answer absolutely

SFExplorer:

After the experience of working on "A Walking Tour Of The Shambles" with Neil Gaiman, would you ever consider co-writing a novel with him. Or with anyone for that matter?

GeneWolfe:

Certainly. He was a joy to work with. I would certainly consider it.

Neophyte:

Gene, is going to college a necessary step in becoming a good writer?

GeneWolfe: No Of course not. I believe that Pred Pohl is the only well-known writer who didn't finish high school. But college isn't absolutely necessary.

ChatMod:

Many writers call you a writers writer. What does that mean?

GeneWolfe:

Well, some people say I've influenced them. But I honestly can't always see it. I assume if they mention me they liked my work.

SFExplorer:

When can we expect the first volume of The Wizard Knight to see print?

GeneWolfe:

I'm told...in January...But understand publishers make predictions, not promises. But I think it will likely be January.

SFExplorer:

The Knight first, and then The Wizard to follow?

GeneWolfe:

Correct. My inkling is the second book will follow the first by a year with a story collection in between.

James-Wynn:

I'm almost finished with 'Hamlet's Mill'. I really enjoyed it, and I have to thank for [you for] it largely because I wouldn't have read it normally except because you indirectly recommended it. (Same for Brazilian Adventure). You have a lot of references to alchemy in your works. What is your favorite source on the subject?

GeneWolfe:

I don't know that I've referred to a source. And I'm not very current on it. I've read a few books and articles but I don't have a favorite source. Sorry.

Aleb:

Your writing seems to blur the distinction between "the others" and "us" so we can't tell who is friend or foe. Is this something that comes from experiences in the military?

GeneWolfe:

Well, it comes from experience. But not the military per se. People do change sides. And people do play one side against the other. When you hold a mirror up to life you have to show that.

falchion:

Was there ever an intentional connection between the goddess Scylla on the Whorl, and the monster Scylla who is contemporaneous with Erebus and Abaia?

GeneWolfe:

Yes. Certainly. I tried to make that clear in the last book. I don't mean they were the same person. They were not. But there was a connection.

MikeJasper:

Gene, what's the process for you as you start work on a new novel? How do you know it's going to be a novel vs. a short story?

GeneWolfe: It's never a question that comes up. It's generally clear to me which it's going to be. Though I've been sadly deceived by Shadow of the Torturer. That was to be a novella. But when I reached the end I wasn't finished and carried it forward. So maybe sometimes I don't know

{NOTE: AT THIS POINT THE WRONG QUESTION SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN MISTAKENLY POSTED. MIKEJASPER'S QUESTION IS PUT UP BUT WOLFE'S ANSWER IS TO MY (UNPOSTED) QUESTION. JW}

[MikeJasper:

Gene, what's the process for you as you start work on a new novel? How do you know it's going to be a novel vs. a short story?]

James-Wynn:

RE:"the others" and "us" -- but "identity" and it's definition seems to be a theme that keeps popping up in your writings. Care to explain your interest in this theme?]

GeneWolfe:

I think that identity and memory are the fascinating themes of life. That and our relationship with God. These are the major, major themes through fiction and myth. I'm sure if we could trace back far enough we'd find they are inherent in the human condition. It would be interesting to know if they are equally important to an alien race. We can speculate but we can't answer that.

SFExplorer:

When you wrote Urth Of The New Sun, among other things was it intended to be bridge between New Sun and Long Sun?

GeneWolfe:

It was to be a capstone to Book of the New Sun. People thought it was incomplete. When I began New Sun I intended to show the rise of a boy to the throne. But some people felt without the New Sun itself I hadn't finished telling the story. So it wasn't a bridge.

ChatMod:

How did you get started as a writer?

GeneWolfe:

I started writing to please my college roommate. He was an illustrator. He needed stories to illustrate. I wrote some ghost stories. Much later I found myself married and living in two rooms and we wanted money to buy furniture and rent a house. I thought maybe I could earn some money writing. So I did. It didn't exactly work out. It took me six years to begin to sell, more or less. It's not the best way to buy furniture, depending on your time scale.

EileenGunn:

Gene, you are a remarkable and remarkably prolific writer. Have you ever been blocked, or gone through unproductive times?

GeneWolfe: Yes but only for brief periods. I think Writers Block is a disorder embraced by its victims. I know how to end block, and I do that. Some writers seem to have no interest in ending it. So it goes on and on. It results from fatigue in the part of the mind that deals with language. So stay away from language. Paint the house. Walk the dog. Don't read. Or write. Or talk. Rest the language centers. Thomas Wolfe would go on long midnight walks through Brooklyn at midnight. He was doing the same thing.

Aleb: There are various commentaries about your writing on the internet. Do you feel people tend to read too much into particular words and phrases that you choose? Or, not enough? :)

GeneWolfe: Both. Depending. Some people skip lightly over what I might think is important. Other people grab a word and blow it way out of proportion. I don't read a great deal of the commentary. I've been surprised and shocked by some of it While some has been very insightful. I don't make a hobby of myself. I don't collect my own books. I'm not interested in me per se.

Latro:

Mr. Wolfe, will you write any more about me? I can't seem to remember the end of my story.

GeneWolfe: I can't either... Seriously, I'm trying to write a new Latro novel. Can't promise to finish. It's in the early stages, but I'm trying.

jf:

Gene, do you have a favorite supernatural Issac Bashevis Singer story?

GeneWolfe:

No. I've read some Singer, but I don't think I've read him in many years or can remember the stories well

ChatMod:

How do you work. How many stories are you working on now?

GeneWolfe:

That varies. Between one and three. Too often I'm working on a novel, but I've promised somebody a story. So then I have a lot of chainsaws in the air.

JudiR: How does a writer of your experience best help a new writer?

GeneWolfe: It's very difficult. It depends on how far along that writer is, and what that writer requires. It has be tailored to the student. I start by reading several short stories, then I have an idea where to begin coaching. The pleasure of all teaching depends on the students and how eager they are to learn. When the students are eager I enjoy teaching. I was at an art college in Savannah and I talked to several classes. There was one man in every class who fell asleep each time in 5 minutes. He needed the rest.

James-Wynn:

Do you feel trapped by the Sci-fi genre and what publishers and readers expect of you?

GeneWolfe:

Not really. I write whatever I want to write and try to find a market. Sometimes I don't find a market but it's a very broad genre. Obviously the market is so much more inclusive now. Listen to the definitions of science fiction over the years. Even the naysayers of ten years ago embrace materials now they once excluded. Along that line, I wrote a novel called Free Live Free with a witch and PI in it. I was told by a number of people that I couldn't have a detective and a witch in the same book. I pointed out that both could be found in the yellow pages, but to no avail. It's a time travel novel. It worked and it's still in print.

archtelamon:

Thoughts on newly released Latro in the Mist.

GeneWolfe:

I think it was a good move. My wife just read it in the combined volume. I like that

Aleb: What motivates you to write? BTW, I appreciate the humor in some of your answers tonight.

GeneWolfe:

I don't have a good answer. Sure, there are things I want to say. I want to talk and I want to listen, like my grand daughter does.

ChatMod:

Did you write Wizard Knight as a single work?

GeneWolfe: Yes I saw it as one novel. But when I finished the very long first draft I realized that some sections were sketchy. Doing it as a single book would have been impossibly lengthy.

SFExplorer:

What comes after The Wizard Knight? Anything definite you will be working on next?

GeneWolfe: The third Latro book I mentioned and the short story collection.

archtelamon:

Would you ever give permission to a movie studio to do a movie on one of your works? If not, why?

GeneWolfe> Certainly I would if I reached agreement with the studio.

James-Wynn:

If your next Latro novel is ever finished, do you plan to wrap it up? In reading the second volume, I kind of expected him to go to India, Central America, and Britain before he got home.

GeneWolfe:

I've felt the same way. I don't think the third will end with a wrap up. It's laid in Egy[pt] during the Persian occupation.

Aleb:

I'm new to your writing. so I apologize if you have had to answer this too many times before. Is Gene Wolfe your real name? Do the shape-shifting characters in your books stem in part from your name or is it the other way around?

GeneWolfe:

I suppose it does stem from my name. As a small boy I was interested in wolves and wolf lore. The kind of things we read as children crop up in our work. Gaiman and I talk about this and agree on that.

archtelamon: What was your definitive/favorite book you've written?

GeneWolfe: That varies according to my mood. Probably...There are Doors more than any other. I think because there is a great deal in it, and it turned out very as I had hoped it would when I started it.

SFExplorer:

Would you prefer to write a movie script for one of your books yourself or let someone else do

it?

GeneWolfe: No, I'm a book person. I don't live in LA and I'm not fascinated with film. Children's book writers love to write for children. Film writers love to write film. I love books.

Corwin:

Gene, which of your books was the hardest to write?

GeneWolfe:

Probably Peace, because I had a very poor idea of where the book was going after I began it, and it was so fertile in producing new characters and situations

James-Wynn: I'm sure you are obligated to read a lot of books as a writer and teacher, but when you walk through a bookstore, what sort of books catch your eye? What sections do you go to first?

GeneWolfe:

That depends on what I'm writing. Usually I'm looking for books that will help me with a [story]. Probably Space travel, Ancient Greece, Fairy lore; whatever I need.

dulac:

Do you tend to plan things out meticulously before you write, or do you try and see where the story goes? I try to know the end of the story when I begin. Kate Wilhelm is the only writer I know who plots meticulously. She only writes after she's bored with the story. That's not the way I work

{NOTE: KATE WILHELM WROTE "THE MILE LONG SPACESHIP" WHICH IS MENTIONED IN "THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS. JW}

dulac: Do you find the many plot connections and themes coming together naturally?

GeneWolfe: Absolutely.

ChatMod:

We're about out of time

GeneWolfe:

Thanks for coming and talking with me. I appreciate it. Good night.

Matt DeLuca — 05 Apr 2003, 11:28 · follows James Wynn

I am archtelamon and i asked a few questions. It was a good chat.

<http://wotmania.com> feed your wot addiction

Brandon Mason — 06 Apr 2003, 00:50 · follows Matt DeLuca

I was Neophyte, and I think that I got the third question asked. I also asked a question that didn't get selected, and that was if the depiction of Severian on the cover of Citadel of the Autarch was what Gene always expected him to look like. I had to leave at 9:30 because I was at work, which was a shame. Good questions, all.