

Seattle report

The Urth list — 6 messages, 4 voices, 20 Jun 2007

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Nigel Price — 20 Jun 2007, 17:04

Mantis gave me permission to reproduce his account of the weekend in Seattle. Wish I'd been there!

Nigel

Hello there Nigel,

How was Seattle? Did you get to talk to Wolfe at all?

It was wonderful!

There was some stress in getting there (we left immediately from the last day of school, with heavy road traffic and unexpected road construction--we had all but given up on making it to that flight, but by running through the airport, and the public address system urging us on by name, we managed to get there after all) and some tedium in getting back, but the part in the middle was magic.

Gene Wolfe had told me in a letter that they would be at the hotel at around one and I should contact him as soon as we arrived. I wasn't sure what day he meant, but I dutifully called, and finding they had arrived, I left a message for them at around 7:30. (Turns out that they were at the museum's costume event, which we had originally wanted to keep as an open option, explaining why we had booked such a razor-close flight, but we had not RSVPed for the event, we hadn't gotten costumes for the girls, and we were frazzled by the day--Cordy had the ceremony of leaving elementary school, on top of the purely travel stuff.)

We slept in late. On the way down to breakfast, I saw a man coming towards us with a bucket of ice. It was, of course, Gene Wolfe. I tried to take the bucket from him. He took it back. He apologized for not returning the call the night before, explaining that they had gotten back from the museum at around midnight. I introduced my wife and children. He said we should have breakfast together downstairs. And so we did.

It lasted for a wonderfully long time. Gene's daughter Terri, whom I had never met in person, came over. Gary K. Wolfe, the `_Locus_` reviewer, came over for a while. Katherine Cramer and David Hartwell came over. Laura took the kids away to the museum when they were done. We were late in getting away to the first of two panels.

After the second panel I met up with family again and we had lunch. Then we tried for a nap. I set the alarm and fell right asleep, but then the girls woke me up fifteen or twenty minutes later and I couldn't go back, even as they conked out.

I finally gave up and got up, then I realized that the book signing was going on downstairs--might even be over. It was around 4 o'clock, I think, when I rushed down there.

There was just the tail end of a line. David Hartwell said someone was looking for me, Michael Straight (from the list), and I found him quickly, or he found me right there. I was happy to meet him in person and asked if there were any others from the list around. He said James Wynn was, but he hadn't seen him. I admitted that I had seen a James Wynn in the audience at the panel and thought the name was familiar, but I didn't have a name tag myself at that point.

Gene was just sitting there by himself, so I got Michael to buy the Dreamhaven chapbook and get it autographed, then we sat there and chatted with him until he had to leave. Astrid Anderson Bear (whom I'd never seen in person) drifted over and sat with us but said nothing. First she was drinking a red beverage in a martini glass, and when that was done she took up some knitting.

It was time for dinner and Michael didn't have any plans so I invited him to join me and my family for sushi. We puzzled over how to find James Wynn. As we were walking to the restaurant, Laura used her cell phone, which reminded Michael that he had James's cell phone number (but no cell phone of his own), so right there we called him up and invited him over.

Dinner was a lot of fun but suddenly it was time to go get ready for the big event!

Michael Straight and the couple Wynn went ahead. They thoughtfully saved places for us at their table.

Gene Wolfe's part was the last segment of the event, and I found it very moving, to the point of shedding happy tears.

Afterward we were all hanging around in the area where the museum wanted to take photos of the inductees, but where was Gene Wolfe? Well, it's like that's my "Bat Signal" or whatever, so I left everything to lend assistance. I looked where the Wolfes had been before, and I looked around from there. I didn't do much in that mazy place, but then they appeared at the end where I'd expected them, and then I jumped into action, clearing chairs from their path like an icebreaker and opening the doors for them.

My point is that I was only gone for a minute or two, and when I came back, Michael Straight had somehow found another member from the list! So there were three from the list.

The Wolfes left shortly after the photos.

The next morning on our way to breakfast we saw Gene sitting by himself in the lobby, so we stopped to talk with him. Gene Rodenberry, Jr., who was waiting for a cab, joined in. Laura said later it was like matter and antimatter--not that they exploded or anything, it was all friendly talking--just that Wolfe's philosophy is largely the opposite of Star Trek's.

That's it in a nutshell. I should try to write down at least an outline of what was said. Already I can't remember who was there when Gene told one story or another--I'll say something to Laura, assuming she had been there, and find out she hadn't.

Of course there's also the problem of interpretation!

When I tried to take the bucket from him, I heard him say, "Oh, Ma!" like I was trying to take the kid's load from him before he dropped it.

Laura heard, "Oh, now!"

And look how simple =that= is, with us being located in a quiet corridor! Contrast with the Hatter's Tea Party of breakfast.

=Michael=

Roy C. Lackey — 20 Jun 2007, 18:30 · follows Nigel Price

Great, Nigel! Mantis is good at writing that sort of thing. But that doesn't relieve Rostrum -- far from it; it only adds to the burden. We need his perspective, and Crush's, too, and any other unidentified list attendees.

-Roy

Michael Straight — 20 Jun 2007, 19:19 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Never fear, Roy. I was just busy comparing notes with Mantis.

I'll start with the award banquet. Neil Stephenson was the MC. He was brief but very funny. Unfortunately, he didn't have anything to say about any of the inductees, including Wolfe. There were two posthumous awards, artist Ed Emshwiller and Gene Roddenberry. Wil Wheaton was there to introduce Roddenberry, whose award was accepted by Roddenberry's son. Wheaton gave a little paeon to the Star Trek ethos and I had to wonder what Wolfe thought of it all, since I see Wolfe's body of work as a pretty strong rebuke to that kind of optimistic humanism.

Wheaton also told a moving story of how when his character, Wesley, was (in the show) promoted to ensign, Roddenberry took his own ensign bars from Roddenberry's actual military service and gave them to Wheaton. Wheaton said, "Gene had told me that Wesley Crusher was the closest he had come to writing himself into the show. I was only filling Gene's shoes as an actor, but you [speaking to Roddenberry's son] more than anyone else have filled his shoes and carried on his legacy in real life." And then he passed Roddenberry's ensign bars along to his son. Pretty classy thing to do, I thought.

Ripley Scott was filming in Europe and so Wolfe was the only inductee actually present to receive his award. David Hartwell introduced Wolfe. He told about how when he left one of his first publishing houses, he was allowed to take one writer with him. Wolfe had published *Fifth Head* and Hartwell had seen drafts of *Shadow of the Torturer*. So when Hartwell told them he wanted to take an author who was working on an intellectual, literary SF book, the suits all broke into grins and shook his hand. Of course, Wolfe went on to win the Nebula award soon after.

Hartwell said that in his professional opinion, Wolfe's body of short fiction is unequalled by anyone alive. He also mentioned that Wolfe had a book published almost every year since the 1970s.

We'd heard each presenter explain why each inductee's stand-in was the appropriate person to accept the award in his place. So then Wolfe came up for his award and said (paraphrasing):

"I'm not the most appropriate person to receive an award for Gene Wolfe. There are many people here who know him much better than I do: his wife Rosemary, his daughter Teri, David Hartwell, Gardner Dozois, Michael Andre-Driussi. I know Gene Wolfe as a scared little man, always groping around for an idea he can use. Not just an idea, but one that will bear fruit. I might plant it, but it is the sun and the rain and the soil and God that do most of the work to make it grow. This is one of the greatest honors of my entire life and standing here before you I

feel shaken to my very core, so I hope you will forgive me if I do not stand here any longer."

I gather Mantis felt pretty honored to receive a shout-out from Wolfe in that context.

I'll post more later about meeting Wolfe and hearing about the books he's currently working on.

Rostrum

Roy C. Lackey — 20 Jun 2007, 22:01 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum wrote:

I'll post more later about meeting Wolfe and hearing about the books he's currently working on.

I'm looking forward to it. And I know for a fact you took a camera and used it! Surely someone here has web space to put the pictures up for all to see.

Meanwhile, here are some more tidbits you and Crush might find amusing. Mantis gave me leave to pass this excerpt along.

-Roy

Are you going to write up a second account, detailing your conversations with Gene and/or others? I would like to read it, and I imagine a lot of other people on the list would like it too. I, at least, like the informal tone of your accounts.

I think things will come through with Rostrum's report. Of course I'll also mention things to you and you can pass along whatever you want.

At the moment I'm still trying to figure out the scene at the signing. When I got there I saw the guy with the suitcase putting his books in. Then David Hartwell said Hey, this guy's looking for you.

Which is a riot, because even though nobody can say my name (dree-YOU-see), still, they communicate to each other.

So then I basically turned around and within a few steps met Rostrum. Look, the place was small, but it was divided in two by this fireplace so there was a bar side and the lobby side where Hartwell sat and I stood. The line of signing seekers went on the bar side and ended at Gene's little desk, which was in sight.

So I'm talking to Rostrum and he's saying Have you seen James Wynn?

And I say I saw him at the panel but I blah blah blah. So I try to describe him.

Meanwhile, at dinner we learned that James was next in line behind the guy with the suitcase! So he was only ten feet away as we're wondering where he might be. And while Rostrum is facing toward the signing area, he has never seen James before, whereas I, who have seen James, am looking the wrong way!

Honestly, at that point there were only six or eight people in the area, including the two guys from the University Book Store behind their table, Gene Wolfe, and David Hartwell. People who miss each other because of a big pillar type of obstruction--creatures running around a tree, nearly colliding.

Or that's the way it seems to me in reconstructing things. Maybe the suitcase guy took a detour before packing up and James was long gone by then, but I definitely saw the suitcase guy packing up.

It is also possible that there was more than one suitcase guy.

Another bit: Rostrum and I were over at the table, and he asked me which collection "Trip, Trap" is in. Someone called out "ORBIT 2," and I looked over to see it was Gardner Dozois! I should've gone over and shaken his hand as being among the first of all Wolfe fans, but it was too boggling at the time. (I'd just been thanking Dwayne of University Book Store for being one of the best at selling the Lexicon--I'd never met him in person, either.) At the Big Event, Hartwell in his presentation told how he first looked at Wolfe's work because of the recommendation of Dozois! Kingmaker! Now I feel I should buy him a drink or three! Next time I will!

At dinner I also reminded everyone about the enigmatic movie version of "The Death of Doctor Island." Rostrum and Crush were blank on it, as if they never heard of it before. Pondering the mystery, James suddenly said, "Why don't you ask Wolfe?" Indeed! I should do that.

=Michael=

Michael Straight — 20 Jun 2007, 22:48 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Part the Second - chatting with Wolfe. Minor spoilers for future Wolfe books ahead (of the sort you might get from reading the back cover).

I had brought a copy of *Soldier of Sidon* for Wolfe to sign. When it was my turn, I thanked him for all the great stories and novels and told him I was particularly glad he had returned to *Latro* because the *Soldier* books are my very favorites of his novels. I told him I thought this new one was every bit as good as the other two, but that I couldn't say for sure since I'd only read it once. He loved that, and told me I really shouldn't rush to judgment. He signed my book "To Michael (for his insight)."

James (Crush) Wynn's wife had the absolute best comment for Wolfe, which I shall be forced to repeat if he doesn't show up and repeat it himself.

While other people were standing in line, I was glancing at name tags hoping to recognize a name and found myself talking to David Hartwell.

He was carrying around what looked like an advance copy of *_Pirate Freedom_*, cover art and all, and said it would be out in November. Hartwell introduced me to Mantis.

Later, Mantis and I had the chance to sit down with Wolfe. He said *_Pirate Freedom_* is about the son of a Mafia don whose dad sticks him in a monastery in the Caribbean in hopes that the son will not get caught up in the Mafia life. The son gets cold feet before he can take his final vows but then finds himself transported back to the 1600's winding up on a pirate ship where he unsuccessfully struggles to avoid becoming a pirate himself.

Wizards and Warp Drives: Hartwell said that Wolfe's next book (*_An Evil Guest_*) is a horror novel, but when I said that to Wolfe, he strongly disagreed with that characterization. He described it as a near-future tale in which warp-drive space ships are available to the very rich and the protagonist is hunting for a wizard (I wasn't clear whether he meant a magical wizard or a "computer wizard" type wizard. I wouldn't be surprised if it's not clear in the book either.) Wolfe says he's about ready for the fourth draft on this one. I believe it was this book (or maybe

the next one) in which he said the protagonist tries to use an attractive woman as bait for catching the wizard, and that Wolfe had the (for him) rare experience of a character (the woman) completely running away with the novel. To the extent that Wolfe was rather upset that the novel ended and said he was going to miss her. The book is told in the third-person which Wolfe claimed he had stuck with all the way through this time.

I'm wondering if Hartwell feels obliged to sell this one as horror because of the title. I'm trying to think, when was the last time you saw an SF novel with the word 'evil' in the title? Not since Heinlein that I can think of, and even there, it comes across as an allusive phrase not a reference to something Evil. The idea of Good and Evil, such that you can refer to a guest as Evil, is usually restricted to fantasy and horror. (Evil Genius is the closest I can think of, but that's almost always used in a silly or ironic way.)

Wolfe said he was also making progress on a third novel (_Sorcerer's House_ according to Mantis) about a confidence man who is released from jail and goes to buy an old house in the country, offering to do the work of renovating it in exchange for a deal on the price. His offer is accepted in accordance with the will left by the former owner, a dead sorcerer, a will which mentions the man by name. The novel is told in the form of letters to the man's twin brother and to his former prison cell mate.

I congratulated Wolfe on the excellent art he's had on the last few novels (Wizard, Knight, and Sidon). He was of the opinion that art directors are the hardest people to work with in the publishing business. My impression was that he meant that with sympathy toward the conflicting demands they have to deal with, because he also talked about the difficult task facing the art director of a magazine. Ever cover of a magazine, he said, has to simultaneously say: "This is that same magazine you love," and, "This is a new issue you've never seen before."

I asked Wolfe about the tale of the Sidhe at the end of Peace, wondering if it was based on an some existing Celtic tale, but Wolfe said he thought it was his own invention, attempting to match the style of other Celtic tales he'd read.

Wolfe seemed to be having a lot of fun, both at the events themselves and in terms of enthusiasm about his writing. I thought it was sweet seeing him taking such good care of his wife Rosemary, pushing her around in her wheelchair and waiting on her. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting him.

Rostrum

Matthew King — 20 Jun 2007, 23:20 · in reply to Michael Straight

On Jun 20, 2007, at 5:48 PM, Michael Straight wrote:

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Evil Guest_) is a horror novel, but when I said that to Wolfe, he strongly disagreed with that characterization. He described it as a near-future tale in which warp-drive space ships are available to the very rich and the protagonist is hunting for a wizard

An Evil Guest is, according to a Sci-Fi Channel article, set in the same world as the recent novella "Memorare"

<http://www.scifi.com/scifiwire/index.php?category=5&id=40135>