

SLF Portolan Project

Interview with George R.R. Martin

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Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay, I'm Mary Anne Mohanraj, I'm Director of the Speculative Literature Foundation. And I'm here today talking with George R.R. Martin, for what we hope will be a new series of pieces on the craft of fiction. Now, I'm also a *Wild Cards* writer and George is my editor there, and absolutely rigorous in his editorial requests [*laughter*] that my characters' choices have consequences. He has had me kill my darlings on more than one occasion, and always for the better. But our plan today is to focus on epic fantasy, as seen in his Game of Thrones series.

So, I first read your work in shorter form with pieces like the chilling novelette *Sandkings*. As a writer, I'm finding the transition from writing shorter works to novels, and longer series, to be challenging at times. So maybe if you can start by just talking a little about epic fantasy and how you approach it differently than other types of fiction writing, which I know you've written in a wide range of forms.

George R.R. Martin: Yeah, yes. [*pause*] Well, epic fantasy in its modern form is very much influenced by Tolkien. I think you have to read Tolkien and look at what he did so successfully. A lot of the writers who follow Tolkien imitated him basically, but I think they took the wrong lessons from him. Hopefully, I took the right ones, but I didn't want to just duplicate Tolkien. I was also reading a lot of historical fiction, which is, you know, grittier, harder-edged, more realistic. And I wanted to meld epic fantasy tradition with the tradition of historical fiction. And that being said, you know, I also wrote some fantasies when I was first breaking in, back in the 70s, a few short stories, but mostly I wrote science fiction in those days; the market for science fiction was a lot bigger. You can look at my science fictions though and say, well, this is not the hard science fiction of the way somebody like Greg Benford would write it. This is really fantasy disguised as science fiction. So there's a lot of fantasy in my science fiction, and! There's a lot of science fiction in my fantasy. Always trying to think of how things really would be in practicality.

So, you know, one example of that is my dragons. I've always been insistent that my dragons have only two legs, two legs and the forelegs are wings, because there's no creature on earth that has four legs and wings, the front legs become the wings. And these four-legged dragons really [*pause*] offended my science fictional sense, [*laughter*] my sense of biology and realism. And I

know that seems ludicrous when you think of it; because my dragons also breathe fire, and there's nothing on earth that breathes fire. But still, that was so much part of the myth, I couldn't part with that.

And I approached vampires the same way. When I wrote my vampire novel *Fever Dream*, you know, I looked at the things about vampires that I could justify in a fairly rationalist way. And I kept that. But other things, about 'vampires can't cross running water', well, obviously, that didn't work for books set entirely on the Mississippi. I threw that out. And vampires are not reflected in mirrors. How the hell would that work? When, you know, that violates all the laws of light, to physics and things like that. So I had to throw that out too. But I played with that and I made use of it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So I think what what I'm hearing here, just check me on this, is that you look to history, to science for a certain level of rigor, so that even when you're constructing something that might have fantastical elements, you wanted to be sure that that additional rigor made the story stronger, but that you were also willing to throw out things if they didn't serve the story that you wanted to tell.

George R.R. Martin: Yes. Yes, and you have to think about how every element affects every other element. Now, *Game of Thrones*, and its sequels, like Tolkien, is a relatively Low Fantasy fantasy. And again, I looked at Tolkien for this, you know, Gandalf is a wizard. But if you look through the books, he does very little wizard-like things.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's right.

George R.R. Martin: When orcs attacked him, he draws his sword. He stands right next to Boromir and Aragorn fighting with a sword. He doesn't just wave his fingers and flames go out and destroy everything. Even when he's meeting the Balrog on the bridge, he's reciting spells and all that, but he's got his staff. He's got his sword and he's fighting the Balrog.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I feel like that is something you have us be careful of in *Wild Cards* too, right, is that you don't want the magic to be so powerful, so overwhelming, or the supernatural - the superhero powers - that it makes the story no longer interesting, right?

George R.R. Martin: Yes, yes and you have to look at how everything connects with everything else. I mean, I get sent these days like every fantasy just being published as they arrive in hopes of me blurbing them.

You know I can't possibly even read all of them. But some of them I do look into for a chapter or two, and the ones that have very High Fantasy where the wizards are really all powerful... It really irritates me when the wizards [are like] that, when they still have kings and princes and they have giant armies of 10,000 people crossing lands to fight and the wizard makes the giant army disappear by waving his hands. No one would have an army in such a world and there would not be kings in such a world. The wizards would be the kings.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's right.

George R.R. Martin: You know, everything I've known about human nature, you know, we have this innate quest for power and dominance. And if we had the power with just a few spells to undo armies, we would be the rulers. Whoever had that power would rule, they wouldn't be the adviser to the ruler or someone who lives all alone in a tower. So you have to look, you know, if you're gonna make pigs fly, you know, it's gonna change the pork industry. *[laughter]* Hugely! Capturing pigs is going to be much harder. So think through everything where you depart from real life, and where you don't depart from real life. Make sure you learn everything you can about what you're writing about, whether it's, you know, medieval armies, or armor and weaponry, or care and feeding of horses, or whatever it is, try to get it right. Because if you get it wrong, somebody will notice and write you letters about it. *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well, so that relates to another question I had. I think you've said that Game of Thrones was based in part on the War of the Roses. And if you could talk a little about how you used history- was it a jumping off point? Did you do extensive research? Are there files full of historical notes, timelines, character sheets? Are there spreadsheets? Or is it more that you read it and absorbed it and then went from there?

George R.R. Martin: Well, I do have notes and timelines and spreadsheets and all of that stuff. But of my own material, not on the Wars of the Roses. (Thank you. Looks like I'm gonna suck down some breakfast here while we talk.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Of course.)

George R.R. Martin: But for the actual historical material, it wasn't a matter of reading it and absorbing it. Like, you know, for years before I started to write *Fever Dream*, I collected every book I could on life on the Mississippi in the steamboat era which roughly speaking was the 1850s through the 1870s. And you never know when you would

need something and you keep the material on hand. Now the Internet has changed things, I have to admit. In the old days, you really had to absorb the material. It was in books. And it was good if the book was on your shelf. So you don't have to go running to the library to look up something, but you'll find yourself, you know, writing and wondering what kind of underwear they wore in 1850. And you better know that because -

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Someone will call you on it.

George R.R. Martin: Yeah. Now of course, you can just probably type on Google what kind of underwear would they wear in 1850 and you'll get an answer which may or may not be right. But -

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Although I kind of find that you know, when you read the texts, you get like little incidents, little moments. I'm working on an epic series, a space opera epic series, having to do with indenture and social movements and fighting for freedom and the right to vote, and I was reading John Lewis's graphic novel *March* and just like bits of dialogue, moments in conversation between people, will then spark ideas. Right? And it's not that you're going to necessarily copy it directly from what happened in history. But when you go to write your scene, those moments stay with you. Right? Like there's, you know, the little girls who were killed in the bombing of the church for example, right, that memory, that moment, stays and then works its way into your story. That may be-

George R.R. Martin: Now are you using that real life moment, or are you doing a fictional version of it?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well I mean, what I'm working on is science fiction so it is set in space on another planet. So it's more thinking about what sorts of incidents- look, there are certain incidents that actually kind of come up over and over. In Gandhi's story, in John Lewis's story, these various things where someone stands up and says, "Well, I'm not willing to be party to this anymore. And if that means you throw me in jail, so be it." Right? So it's looking at how that plays out. And I think, you know, *Game of Thrones*, I was reading an article that was talking about it as sociological fiction in the sense that you... and it reminds me of Gabriel Márquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude*, right? Because you're writing about big, sweeping societal movements. And as a result, even though we meet Ned Stark in the first book, and in a sort of more typical fantasy novel, we might get, you know, "Oh he's a central character, I care about him, I'm engaged, I'm going to follow him," and then- spoiler- he dies! And in a more standard fantasy novel, I think that wouldn't

work. Here, because the story you're telling is a bigger, broader story, and maybe that's what I'm thinking of when I think of epic, it's not really about that. It's about the larger changes that are coming to Westeros and these larger struggles for power and I feel like the same thing happens in *Hundred Years of Solitude*, right? It covers a hundred years, all the characters you meet and care for in the beginning of the book are dead by halfway through the book. [laughter] So maybe... sorry, so I guess the question embedded in that is, does that seem like a fair characterization of what you were doing? Of epics in general? Perhaps?

George R.R. Martin:

Well, I need time to cover a hundred years unless you're, you know, in a far future thing where people now live for a thousand years. Yeah, all of your characters are gonna die if you're covering a period. So far, you know, *Game of Thrones* may have taken a hundred years to write. [laughter] but I've only actually covered about three or four years so far. I was inspired by Wars of the Roses. I love historical fiction. I read a lot of it. I'm very impressed by the people who do it well like Bernard Cornwell in the current days or Thomas B. Costain. Back in the 50s, perfect writers [like] Nigel Tranter, the great Scottish historical novelist who kept turning out his books until he was in his mid-90s. That's something I hope to emulate.

[laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Me too! So, we're gonna be there together.

George R.R. Martin:

But the thing about historical fiction, why I don't write it, is because you're locked in by the history.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Right

George R.R. Martin:

And sometimes the history has great stories in it, but sometimes it has frustrating omissions, or things that are not known, or things that turn out- to me- the wrong way. So by using this as inspiration, but mixing and matching, taking a bit of this, a bit of that, and turning it up to eleven. I mean, fantasy always has to be a little bigger and brighter and more colorful than real life. So I can be inspired by Hadrian's Wall but Hadrian's Wall was like ten feet tall and my wall was like seven hundred feet tall, and made of ice, and has certain magical spells about it. So, yeah, you have to go with that. So the people who read my books and notice the similarities to Wars of the Roses... [pause] many of them take it too far and they think, "Oh, I got this now, it's parallel. And they try to do a one on one: Okay, this character is this character, and this

character,” and then they come a cropper because then things don't turn out the way the Wars of the Roses turned out. Which is good. I like surprising my readers, whether it's for good or bad, you know. And I hate...you know what I always think, and this is something I think every writer should do, you write what you want to read. And what I love to read are books that draw me in, that suck me into a world, but that also surprise me. There are so many books out there and believe me, I am sent many of them, where you read the first chapter and you know exactly how it's going to go. You know, you see who the hero is and who the villain is. You know, here's this hero and he meets this girl and they can't stand each other. Okay, they'll be in love by the end of the book. You know, it's just the same old stuff, sometimes in new bottles, and some of it is tastier than others, yeah. But I prefer books where something happens that I never saw coming. But I look back and say, yes, he laid the groundwork for that, she laid the groundwork for that. Well enough, but it still took me by surprise. So that's what I try to do for my readers.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

So can I ask, in laying the groundwork and making these plans, and I feel like when you're writing a story and publishing it seriously, when you're, I mean, I think anyone working on an epic, it has to take quite a long time to just to do the writing of it right? Even if not complicated by TV series, etc. and so on, right, so as you're writing, surprises must have emerged that ended up contradicting your earlier plans, your expectations when you first started sketching things out. So I'm wondering if there any examples that come to mind that took effort to manage; if there was a new character that emerged, or a discovered continent, a hidden subculture, like you're in the midst of book three, and suddenly you're like, “Oh, I did not anticipate that becoming a thing or a prominent thing.” Any specifics?

George R.R. Martin:

Yeah, that does happen with me. Quite a bit. And also the flip side of that, which is where you, you know, you're writing the first book, and you lay in some little hints as to some development that you think you're going to have in the fifth book. But then the plot goes away from that. And then you realize as you're writing the fifth book, “Oh, my God, I planted those clues. I have to pay that off.” Otherwise, there's gonna to be a loose end and you have to be aware of that all the time. There's... [pause]

I've often said in lectures there are two kinds of writers, who are like all the architects and the gardeners. And you know an architect designs a house, and he lays out the blueprints, and.. how many rooms is it gonna be? What kind of roof is it going to have? How's it going to be heated? Is it forced air heating? Is it

baseboard heating? Is it electrical heating under the floorboards? You know, where are the toilets going to be? It- does it have a basement, does it not have a basement, every detail of the house is worked out before a single nail is drawn. Sometimes before the land, [the] ground is even broken for it. It's all laid out. And then there are the gardeners and they dig a hole and they plant a seed and they see what comes up. [laughter] And they water it and they hope it grows, it doesn't die! The gardeners know little things, I mean they know whether they planted an oak tree or a tulip. But a lot depends on, you know, the process of growth. And now no writer is a hundred percent gardener or a hundred percent architect, but they do tend to one side or another and I'm very much a gardener, as Tolkien was. I mean, you know, *Lord of the Rings* started out being a sequel to *The Hobbit*, another little adventure for children of hobbits. And it grew ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It just grew.

George R.R. Martin: ...into this gigantic three volume thing that borrowed a little from *The Hobbit* and a lot from *The Silmarillion* and which he had not completed by then, and then became this magnificent contribution to world literature. But when you're a gardener things like that do happen. I was, when I was in my 20s and living in Chicago, where you live now-

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhmm, great city.

George R.R. Martin: I helped found the Windy City Writers Workshop of science fiction and fantasy writers. We got together once a month and created stories. And most of us were young writers in our 20s or early 30s. But we had the great good fortune to have two members who were older and veterans of science fiction/fantasy. One of them was Algis Budrys, AJ, an incredible writer, and the other one was Gene Wolfe. And Gene was, we just lost Gene this last year. I hadn't seen him for years but he was an amazing man. And he was so good at those writers workshops, at taking stories apart and telling you things to do and not to do. But we were fortunate because we were in this workshop and getting to see what eventually became Gene's *The Shadow of the Torturer* books, you know, which started as a trilogy and ultimately became four books.

The thing is Gene had a day job. He was the editor of *Plant Engineering Magazine*. And he wrote weekends and nights. And he wrote that entire trilogy- what was a trilogy, became four books- he wrote the entire thing before he let any of it be published. So you know, when he wrote book four and finished it, now he could go back and revise book one because it hadn't been published yet. And he could get everything all polished and all that before he sent

it to the editor. And I've often envied Gene's ability to do that. I mean, in a perfect world, I would have written all of the books of Game of Ice and Fire before I let the first one go out. But I don't have a day job, I'm not the editor of *Plant Engineering Magazine*, and I depend on the earnings from my books. So when I finished *A Game of Thrones*, I had to sell it and send it to my publisher and have it published. But inevitably when you do that, then you have the choice "Well do I go back now and revise book one, because of the things I later know in book five?" I've always felt that was sort of cheating. So I don't expect I'm going to do that. But there's part of me that wishes I could.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yes. I always think of Dickens, right, who had just serialized even a novel, right, and sent it out chapter by chapter. And just how frustrating it must have been when he wanted to change things and couldn't. Right. So-

George R.R. Martin: There are, Dickens-like [pause] people doing that on the internet, even now. They are publishing their books for free on the internet.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Now it's been re-emerging as a new form, right? Sending it out section by section. I'm seeing Bujold, I'm reading her new series that she's been releasing as little e-books, the Penric series, which I think is gonna end up basically being one long novel when it's all together. But because she's releasing them in pieces, it's... Yeah, she won't be able to go back and change it unless... I agree. I'm with you in that I would have a hard time going back and revising something that was already published and out there.

Alright, I have just a few more questions that I asked people what they wanted to ask you and I, they had so many questions for you, but we're keeping it to this topic. So one thing people were asking about was world-building and just, when you're trying to do something that has such a large scope, you know, do you start small and specific with "here's a moment, here's a place, here's a character," and then let it get big, or do you have sort of a sense of the larger world at the beginning of it and then kind of focus in from there?

George R.R. Martin: You know, as a gardener, I had no idea when I started. [laughter] I didn't even when, you know, the first chapter came to me, I thought maybe this was a short story or something. But even by the time I finished, it only took me like two, three days to write that first chapter.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's so interesting. I was just reading Le Guin's- you know, they reissued the Earthsea books for the fiftieth anniversary, and they included an introduction by her where she talks about starting with

maps, that she actually drew the maps of Earthsea. And then from there, kind of focused in on that moment on the Isle of Gont and then I think was very gardener-like in her approach after that. If that makes sense.

George R.R. Martin: Yeah I um, I just started writing. I wrote the first chapter and by the time I finished I knew what the second chapter had to be, and you know, I am introducing characters along the way. I think I was probably about 50-60 pages in before I decided I had better draw a map. *[laughter]* And you know, I drew it just on a piece of typing paper you know, a nine by twelve, and I actually had to use two. Because the North was.. I had a line that the North was as big as all the six kingdoms in the South combined, so I had to do it on two- so the shape was dictated by the shape of the typing paper, of my continent of Westeros. *[laughter]* And at some point also I've been throwing in these occasional references to history to give the sense of history, you know-

Mary Anne Mohanraj: There's a depth to it all.

George R.R. Martin: To dead kings and all that, and I better make a list of all these dead kings and work out that so I just, you know, made up names and dates and tried to vary it, some reigning a long time, some reigning a short time, etc. And their relation to the king before them. Even then I got myself into trouble when some of that material had been published. Elio and Linda, my fans who do the Westeros website, pointed out that my chronology couldn't actually work so I had to alter that. *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well you know, in the eons of transcription of this, some things were inevitably lost and mistranscribed. But I love the depth of it, I think that is part of what sets Westeros apart. Similar to Gene's books, actually, is that they have such a sense of depth and complexity. And I think when you... I love epic fantasy, but I would agree that a lot of what I pick up is a little thin by comparison, right? And maybe it's because the authors have not done the layering that you do, in that. Does that make sense?

George R.R. Martin: We owe all of it to Tolkien really. I mean, he changed the face of epic fantasy. I remember, you know, being a kid in junior high, in high school, reading *Lord of the Rings*, when it was coming out, and I enjoyed those books so much! I love those books so much I didn't want them to end. And as I'm reading, you know, I'm halfway through *Return of the King* and it seems that the ring is already gone into Mount Doom. I'm so, "Oh my god, it's almost over. Wait a minute, there's still a lot of pages left here." And of course, I have the Scouring of the Shire.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I am so mad that was left out of the movies! [*thud*] It's the most important part. Okay, sorry. [*laughter*]

George R.R. Martin: It is a very important part, yes. Although I don't think I understood that as a junior high school kid.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, no.

George R.R. Martin: What the hell is all this? They put the ring in here. And then I hit the appendices. And at first I was enraged, because I thought I had more story and instead I have all these footnotes and appendices!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: [*laughter*] Right.

George R.R. Martin: But as I've gotten older, and I've looked back, I really appreciate the appendices. See, Tolkien really worked out all the world: the Kings of Numenor and you know, the history of the various kingdoms of Middle Earth, and their rise and fall. He had all of that worked out and of course later I heard about his life, and it turned out he'd been working on *The Silmarillion* all this time since World War I and it's the book he never completed during his lifetime. But he had all of this background; in some ways that was more interesting to him than the foreground story. So I set out to, you know, kind of emulate that and I've gone about it in a different order. But you know, I've recently published *Fire and Blood*, which is my book of imaginary history, and I have more to do. I have a *Fire and Blood 2* to do and that just covers Westeros. That, I have a whole other world there. So it's developed in some detail.

But you know, they say of icebergs, that three-quarters of it is below the surface. So you're just seeing the iceberg, you're just seeing a little bit on top. And Tolkien's work truly was an iceberg where, you know, you saw *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* were on top. And then there was this immense construct underneath it. Most fantasy writers have some ice piled up on a raft. [*laughter*]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's a great image.

George R.R. Martin: There's nothing under the water. They're just faking it. And that was true of me too, when I began, but I think at this point, now I have a fair amount of

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... iceberg underneath.

George R.R. Martin: ...ice under the surface.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well, that's a great... I think that is, in fact, where I have trouble, I think, and I think it's laziness. Honestly, I think it's this sense of like, "Oh, that's a lot of work that nobody's ever going to see." But of course it is. Even if people don't see it directly, it makes what they do see so much better. Right? And so it is worthwhile.

George R.R. Martin: If you look at the fantasists before Tolkien it was very different. I mean, Lord Dunsany, who was a brilliant writer. It's all, you know-

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's very stylized, right?

George R.R. Martin: And once upon a time there was a king and you know, he had a beautiful daughter and then an elf came in, but you don't get the sense of, "Okay, what was the name of the dynasty this king was, who was the king before him? How did this dynasty come to power? How many kings have there been? How many?" You know?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think Dunsany's, he's closer to folklore and fairy tale, right, in the mode of storytelling. Whereas what you're doing is closer, and Tolkien is closer, to historical fiction.

Okay, well, we are almost out of time. I'll just leave with: Is there anything you'd like to mention that we haven't talked about, advice to young writers, getting started with epic fantasy or, like me, middle aged writers mired in the muddle of an epic space opera. *[laughter]* So it doesn't have to be fantasy, just, when you're working through the epic, is there anything else you'd like to add?

George R.R. Martin: Well, um, when I'm talking to aspiring writers, I always tell them to persist. This is not a job that will give you any security ever. If you, psychologically you need security, I hear accountancy is good, you know, something. You know, you take a job and you'll get a promotion every few years and a raise and eventually they give you a gold watch, that wouldn't happen with writing. I've had in many ways, a career that most people would envy and yet there have been at least two times in my career where it all crashed and burned. And I thought I was going to have to, you know, get a job selling real estate or something like that. You know, you can be the hottest guy in the world one moment and then two years later, your agents won't return your phone calls. So, you have to be prepared for that.

You have to persist. You know, if you write a book and no one wants to buy it, write another book. Maybe someone will still buy that unsold book one of these days, but meanwhile, write another one and then write another one and write another one. Don't stop writing. I mean, I look at the people who started with me in the

early 70s. And some of them, sadly, have passed on. Others have just disappeared. I presume they're out there somewhere, but they're not writing anymore. I don't see their work, they hit an iceberg, or they hit a period of rejection and they gave it up. You are going to get a lot of rejection. And you have to, we have to push through that.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's one of the things I always tell my students. I mean, even as an editor, when we were editing *Strange Horizons*, there were a lot of writers who would be rejected once or twice and then stop submitting to us and you always want to say to them, "Look, there are people who we've rejected eight times and then we bought the ninth story," right, and then because they got to there, you know, they just had to work through to that point. So...

George R.R. Martin: And you know, we're here in Dublin having this discussion and the World Science Fiction Convention is about to begin. That's another thing I also tell young writers, you know, in an ideal world, I suppose it would just be words on the paper that matter, but in the real world, it helps to have connections, it helps to network. And to come to these things, you know, there are things you can learn from the panels and the discussions. But even more than that, just meeting other writers, meeting the editors, meeting the agents; sitting down with them, having a cup of coffee, hearing what they're talking about, and you know, talking about what you're talking about, and you hear what they're doing and they hear what you're doing. And you know, maybe a few years from now, one of them will be editing an anthology, and they'll say, "Oh, you know what, I should ask that person I met at that Dublin con, maybe I'll invite him or her to submit to my anthology." And it's not a-

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's very human.

George R.R. Martin: Yeah, it's the way things work in Hollywood and in this world. And yeah, there are a few people, there's always the JD Salingers or the Greg Egans in our world who, people that nobody knows who just sit at home and write their books, but a lot of it... It helps to be part of this convention circuit and to be plugged into the world.

Also, for me anyway, it's fun.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah. *[laughter]*

George R.R. Martin: I love going to conventions. I love seeing my friends and seeing what's going on with them.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, I'm looking forward to WorldCon, it's going to be a blast. So, well I think that's the end of our time. So thank you so much,

George. As always, a pleasure to talk with you. This was Mary Anne Mohanraj interviewing George R.R. Martin for the Speculative Literature Foundation. Thanks, everyone. Bye!