

Conducted by Glen Cox

□ **This interview was originally published in *NOVA Express*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Fall 1988.**

*[Blaylock and I sat in the lobby of the Austin Wyndham, taking a break from the antics of ArmadilloCon X, where I quickly plied him with some Bass Ale, his favorite brew. My intention: to make him feel at ease. I wasn't blind to the fact that he was wary of this interview, almost wary of people in general. This was the same man who inscribed my copy of **Homunculus** at ArmadilloCon last year with, "For Glen, who has just listened to my first-ever reading. I'm shaken by it, and can't think." This same timidity comes across in his writing, which makes it that much more honest. Rummaging in my backpack, I pull out back issues of *Nova Express* and hand them to him, then reach over to the middle of the table and turn the recorder on.]*

James P. Blaylock: Hmm. I'm sort of partial -- in magazines of this sort--I'm a little partial to non-fiction anyway. I don't know why this is. I really like *SF Eye*, for example, it's a very readable magazine. My least favorite was the fiction issue, just because their non-fiction has been so good and their interviews have been so good, that I wanted more and more and more of that.

Glen Cox: Let's jump right into it. William Ashbless is not real?

JB: No.

GC: Totally made up?

JB: Entirely and utterly made up.

GC: I suspected, but wasn't sure. You really gave it away with **The Last Coin**, cause there's that one section--Book III--that starts out....

JB: The One Pig.

GC: Right. *[The full quotation that starts Book III is, "...One pig to rule them all,/One pig to bind them,/One pig to bring them all/and on the pier end find them/In Seal Beach, on the Coast." --William*

Ashbless, Myths of the Pacific Coast--Ed.]

JB: Yeah, that kind of put paid to that. Obviously it couldn't be an authentic book. We [Blaylock and Tim Powers] just decided it was too tiresome to try to keep pretending he was authentic. Also, two or three people had come up to us and said, "Geez, I spent all day long at the university library trying to find a reference to him!" and we said, "That's kind of a drag, isn't it?" So we decided to come clean on that. Also we had worked him pretty hard in a few novels. He may well reappear, I don't know. After you work a character over and play the prank for a while, it seems that there ought to be new things to do.

GC: There's a scene in **The Last Coin** where Andrew discovers that Aunt Naomi (whom he has been having a feud with from the beginning of the book) likes cereal just like he does. I feel it's a breaking point in that book. Up until then, it's from Andrew's point of view, he's really eccentric and at that point it seems there's a whole shift where you realize that you are seeing Aunt Naomi through Andrew's eyes and when this happens you realize that, "Wait a minute...she's not as bad as he's portraying her," and you see something different and the book kind of changes from there. Was that deliberate?

JB: Yeah, to a degree. I think that was one of the first times when Andrew finally stopped getting carried away by his passions and his eccentricities and sat down for a moment and actually listened to her and thought about her and talked to her and found out she was a human being too. Up until then he had been reacting furiously to her cats or something else like that. Actually, Andrew Vanbergen...a lot of his eccentricities and his passions are simply my own. It's always funny to me when people say that they find him an eccentric character; he seems like the sort of guy I can understand. But obviously he jumps to conclusions about all kinds of people in the book without enough justification and then later on either suffers for it or figures out he's been a fool. So, yeah, I wanted that scene to be a turning point for him, one in which he becomes instantly more sympathetic. Also, I've always hoped that I

could take a really sort of mundane and pedestrian thing, whatever it happened to be--in this book it was breakfast cereals and in **The Digging Leviathan** I tried to do it with the bottle caps that they wore on their shirts--take that sort of mundane thing that I really have no business carrying on about at such length, and turn it into a something fairly crucial and even climatic and emotional, where people say, "Yeah, I really like the scene with the breakfast cereals," instead of them having to say, "I really like the scene where the guy's head exploded or he got shot." Try to pull it off with breakfast cereals instead of a .45.

GC: That's when I finally realized what I really liked about your writing. I got to that point and thought, "Wait a minute, these people are real." You don't see peoples' heads explode, and you don't see people getting shot everyday. You see people eating breakfast cereal, and it was just the reality of, "Here are people meeting at midnight to eat breakfast cereal." I've done that.

JB: Sure. My kids love it. They're eight years old, but if they got out of bed at midnight because they couldn't sleep and I said, "Let's have a bowl of breakfast cereal," it'd be like heaven for them. It'd be better than a trip to Disneyland. Maybe. I've always felt that way about the little elements of our lives and one of my great goals was to take those sorts of elements and do something with them artistically. Try to make the reader perceive them in the same light that I perceive them.

GC: You use a lot of real things in Southern California that appear in your books, like Acres of Books. And you've just said that Andrew is a kind of reflection of your own eccentricities. How much of it is real and where does the fantasy come from? Where is the branching point?

JB: That's kind of hard to answer because reality and fantasy really blend together there and I won't try to suggest that I'm Andrew Vanbergen because I'm not. He's me, in certain ways, carried to an extreme. He probably has sympathetic characteristics that I don't have. And I would never have any kind of war with an invalid aunt. I would say, though, that both this book and **The Digging**

Leviathan are highly autobiographical. In fact, almost all of my protagonists are me or some section of me inflated. But those two books are the most autobiographical, I'm sure. Most of the day to day incidents of that nature--the little breakfast cereal scenes or the characters getting mad at toothpaste tubes or whatever -- those are autobiographical. In **The Digging Leviathan** there's a scene in which William Hastings, who's a real forerunner of Andrew Vanbergen, goes crazy because of a kink in the garden hose, and he hacks it up with hedge clippers. That nearly happened. I had the hedge clippers in my hands in the back yard and I was advancing on the garden hose, determined just to hack it to oblivion. But I stopped short of actually hacking it up because it occurred to me that probably my wife was watching out of the window and the neighbors would be looking over the fence at that moment and I would simply seem to be certifiable. So I got to have William Hastings do what I wanted to do with that garden hose. The toothpaste scene, too, where he tears the toothpaste tube up: again, autobiographical. I stopped short of nailing it to the wall as an example to other nasty toothpaste tubes. A high percentage of those sorts of scenes are autobiographical. That's especially true of **The Last Coin**, I think. I've always sort of wanted to open a "Bed and Breakfast" because I love to cook and as far as home cooks go I'm probably all right. And I saw the opportunity here to have this B&B setting from the point of view of a person just like me, who'd really like to do it, might even have certain skills along those lines, but know absolutely nothing about it. But I could have Andrew cook up a big pot of gumbo (because I can cook up a big pot of gumbo) and seem to know what he's doing, while at the same time seem completely cockeyed: spending money on liquor and all the kitchen and bar paraphernalia. It's the trick of sliding in a naive protagonist or view-point character in order to cover your own lack of knowledge. I don't have to pretend to be adept at opening a Bed and Breakfast, because my character's not. So that was pretty much just me fumbling through.

GC: This whole inept hero concept is something that goes through

The Digging Leviathan, Land of Dreams, Homunculus. It seems to be something that goes through a lot of your stories, whereas it doesn't in Powers's. His heroes are not inept even though they're slightly smaller than your epic heroes.

JB: Perhaps. But they sometimes drink too much, and they make some mistakes and end up getting stomped an awful lot, Powers's characters do. My characters generally don't get beat up. I suppose -- and Powers would agree with me, I know he would -- that traditional epic heroes don't live in my neighborhood. I don't know whose neighborhood they live in. When I was writing the book, I realized that my villain was such that the Arnold Schwarzenegger type of hero, the sword-wielding hero, the Duke Hard-Jaw type of hero, would not have been able to deal with him, he...

GC: [interrupting] No, he would have died.

JB: Yes. What I needed there was a guy who was so far out in left field that my villain would not understand where the enemy was or what he was -- the enemy was laughing at the villain too often. The enemy was coming up with these joke letters and these joke phone calls and stuff, in order to low-ball him all the time, and drive him nuts in ways that he couldn't fathom and couldn't deal with; these things were beyond his ken. He's this incredibly old and powerful man who simply had never run into an antagonist as loony as Andrew. And just as I used his naiveté to pull off the running of a B&B, I used his naiveté to make him a more formidable character.

GC: Even though he is a nut, he does the job.

JB: Yes. In fact, there's a scene right in the beginning, when Andrew and Pickett are sitting around talking about breakfast cereals and Andrew says something like, "Success through naivete is the way I look at it. I don't care what they're doing in the restaurant down the street, I'm going to serve Weetabix and they can go to hell." That was sort of the way I approached the whole book, which again explains why I chose that sort of character. It occurred to me when I read Faren Miller's review of **The Last Coin** in Locus -- she really said some nice things about it; I was happy to see that review -- she said that the main character was so

eccentric that he drove her nuts with his shenanigans. It struck me when I was reading the review that I had never thought of it in those terms. He doesn't seem overly eccentric to me, perhaps because I share his eccentricities.

GC: The real is more strange than the fantasy.

JB: Much more. To my mind there's absolutely nothing fantastic, imaginative or compelling about blue unicorns or flying cats or two-headed martial art experts with apostrophized names. I'm much more interested in writing about people who I know and have an affection for, and who are much more authentic to my mind.

GC: I was wondering what your sources for the legend of the Wandering Jew were?

JB: Largely **Curious Myths of the Middle-Ages** by Sabine Baring-Gould.

GC: Oh! I've read his **Annotated Mother Goose**.

JB: Yeah, yeah. He's good. The thing I like about it is that it was published a long time ago and so you don't have to get anybody's permission to quote it. His **Curious Myths of the Middle-Ages** includes a fascinating chapter on the Wandering Jew, and equally fascinating chapters on other things, even nursery rhymes like "Jack and Jill" and "The Man in the Moon." I swear that there's not a single chapter there that couldn't suggest an entire novel. I used the book heavily in a children's novel that I just finished up. That was my main source for the Wandering Jew. Although, once I started looking around, it became very, very clear from the Britannica and other sources that the Wandering Jew legend has many different stories attached to it.

GC: In the majority of versions, is the Wandering Jew Judas Iscariot?

JB: No, no. I find that in the majority of versions the Wandering Jew was generally a cobbler who had been sitting on his stoop while Christ was hauling the cross up the hill. As I recall the story, Christ wanted to sit and rest but the cobbler wouldn't allow it, and so Christ said that the cobbler would never die but would wander

the world forever. It doesn't seem to matter which version of the myth you read, there are always certain similarities – his affinity to animals, for instance, and also the fact that despite his starting out being a sort of nasty character, he always turned into a highly-regarded character, kind of a folk hero type.

GC: I really liked that you made him Judas Iscariot. I had heard a version of the Wandering Jew legend like you just described, but when I read that, something clicked saying, "Yeah, Judas." It's a form of change. You always think about, "Does the character change in the novel?" but here's a character who's changed before the novel and we get to see what he's changed into. And you've always known the bad stuff.

JB: Well, in fact, one of the first detailed Wandering Jew tales that I heard had it simply that Judas was so overwhelmed with remorse for having betrayed Christ that he attempted to hang himself and failed -- he couldn't -- and was condemned to wander the earth forever. And at that point there were a lot of things that had clicked in my mind having to do with the thirty pieces of silver. I find it enigmatic that it was necessary for Judas to betray Christ with a kiss when in fact the people who were out to arrest him knew exactly who he was. Why was it necessary to identify him? There are a lot of strange and peculiar elements in the Bible that are never summed up or explained, and which invite a fictional explanation.

GC: That brings up an interesting point. Not too many people are writing fantasy based on the Bible...

JB: No.

GC: And here's a fantasy that's got a basis in the Bible, yet it's not. It really doesn't have a Christian moral.

JB: Not really. Not any more than any other book.

GC: It looks to me like a mine that has yet to be tapped in fantasy. Orson Scott Card has been going on about how he's tired, like most of us are, of fantasies about medieval 15th and 16th century British culture. This was part of the reason behind his Alvin Maker series, to capture some of the American folklore. And yet, here's this

biblical folk stuff that we have and no one's tapping it.

JB: Oh, yes, absolutely. I grew up going down the street to the Presbyterian church every Sunday morning, and have been steeped in Bible stories my entire life, as many of us have. There's a giant, largely untapped quantity of stuff there. In my fiction I try to deal with what I know--my own neighborhood. One of the things that I wanted to do in **The Last Coin** was to avoid insulting anybody's religious notions. I wanted to be very careful not to have anybody think I was proselytizing or trying to insult Catholics or Jews or anybody else. I wanted to use the mythology without anybody saying, "Here's a Christian novel." I really admire the writings of C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams, for example, two of the great fantasists without a doubt, especially Charles Williams. One of the things that I admire about those two is that they had a real obvious Christian persuasion and yet they developed their plots by drawing on world mythologies. Neither one of them had anything against hauling Egyptian gods or Greek mythology into their books. I think that they genuinely saw it as one big fascinating connected thing. So, I kind of wanted to do the same thing: use the mythology without committing myself to any sort of philosophy aside from whatever philosophy arose naturally in the book.

GC: Have you read George McDonald?

JB: Yeah.

GC: I find his religious stuff--where he actually uses his religious ideas and forces them into the book--I find those stories to be the worst. They just don't work as well as the stories where he doesn't use that, like **The Princess and Curdie**.

JB: Yes, you're right.

GC: This reminds me of another thing I wanted to bring up: Lucius Shepard's "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter." McDonald, in one of the Curdie books, ends it with "...they live happily ever after in their castle," and the next sentence says that a hundred years later the castle fell down and they were dead and buried in this graveyard over here. It's an ending to a children's or fantasy story that you don't expect and that you don't see, and Lucius Shepard

has a great one in this vein in Scalehunter's: "...--and from that day forward she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in between." And to read this story, which has roughly the same sort of medieval feel, and yet you get to the end and say, "Didn't that make a lot more sense?" He told us the truth and it was more real because of it even though it was fantasy. JB: I'll buy that entirely.

GC: I don't know how true this is, but I'll see if you agree: your male protagonists seem to be mainly, as we said before, eccentric...inventors, people that want to be creative, and yet, backyard inventors, garage inventors. While the women on the most part seem to be strong, more forceful characters, more in control. Is that more to foil the males, or is that unconscious?

JB: Again, that might be at least partly autobiographical in that my wife, for example, tends to be fairly strong and practical. She's worked full time jobs for twenty years and supported the family while I was living this life of Riley. She tends to pay attention when she drives while I look at the scenery -- she has these qualities that I really admire and would like to have but keep losing sight of. And, especially when I wrote **The Last Coin**, I suppose. Rose in **The Last Coin** is a version of my wife. They're different in ways, just as I'm different from Andrew Vanbergen.

GC: Did you write your novels in the order they were published in: **The Elfin Ship**, **The Disappearing Dwarf**, **The Digging Leviathan**, **Homunculus**, **Land of Dreams**, **The Last Coin**?

JB: Yes.

GC: What caused this sudden shift away from the Del Rey fantasy to **The Digging Leviathan**?

JB: That's very easy to answer. I had written **The Elfin Ship** and **The Disappearing Dwarf** for Del Rey and they actually did very nicely for me: they're still in print. And so I was happy with my career. As I recall it, my agent submitted an outline for a version of **The Digging Leviathan** that he was shopping around, and Del Rey Books really despised it. They did not publish "loony" books. They knew what they were publishing and this was for sure not it.

And shortly after that I was talking to Judy-Lynn del Rey, who I admire immensely as an editor. She treated me so well that she's just one of my favorite memories. She helped popularize science fiction/fantasy to the point at which today there's a possibility of me making a living as a science fiction writer. But when I called Judy-Lynn on the phone one day and said, "Look, I've got these two or three ideas for stories." (One of them was essentially for **Homunculus** and another for...I can't remember what it was.) She said, "No, no, Blaylock, you're missing the point."

GC: "Not our stuff."

JB: Yeah, not our stuff. At about that time the outline for **The Digging Leviathan** went to Ace Books. Beth Meacham was editor at the time. She said to my agent that it was the single strangest novel proposal Ace Books had ever got, but that, yes, in fact they thought they'd give me a chance to see if I could write it. It occurred to me that despite the fact that I was doing very well at Del Rey, I needed the artistic freedom to write what I chose. And here's Ace saying you can write a nut book for us if you want to. The same was true of **Homunculus**; they didn't bat an eye. It's a neo-Victorian nut-scientist book, but they had no problem with that.

GC: Del Rey seems to be on the wane these past few years. Part of it I gather is, unfortunately, Judy-Lynn's death. But could it also be that structure that she forced on the fantasy that Del Rey published? 'Cause it seems to me that all the fantasy that came out from them was in that same sort of vein. It had the dwarves, it had the elves...

JB: Yeah. In fact, Judy-Lynn told me that she didn't quite know what to do with my books because they quite clearly weren't epic fantasy. She said she thought they read almost like satires of epic fantasy and she had no idea where to put them on her bookshelf. That made me very happy; I could be smug here and say that perhaps if I had tried to write like Terry Brooks or like Stephen R. Donaldson or like Piers Anthony, I could have sold a million copies too. I don't think that's true, I think those guys wrote that

way by inclination and they wrote that way well. My sensibilities were different. I wouldn't have done it well.

GC: That's what they wanted to write.

JB: Yes, and that's why their books are honest and why they work. Mine would have been fakes and they would not have worked, probably. I had to write what I had to write. Maybe Del Rey declined for the same reason the Roman Empire finally went down, it lasts "X" hundreds of years and then it goes. Look at what happened to most of the writers of Ace Specials, that big year when **Neuromancer**, **The Wild Shore**, **Green Eyes**, and all sorts of other big books came out in one big chunk, in 1984. That was the year that **The Digging Leviathan** came out. Where are all those writers now? Almost none of them are with Ace. They went to Bantam, they went to Tor. Things change fast.

GC: [Kim Stanley Robinson] told us at WorldCon that Ace had in their contract on the specials, that they had first look at the next novel that those authors wrote, but he said that when he sent them **The Gold Coast** after **The Wild Shore** they weren't interested. Or if they were interested, they didn't want to give him as much money for it, and that's why he went to Tor. I think on the Locus list this is the first year that Del Rey wasn't number one [publisher]. Now, I think it's more of a split between Tor/Ace/Del Rey and Del Rey is no longer the megalomaniac on top. They used to really dominate. I think it's good, because of the new competition factor.

JB: I think Tor took a lot of chances to get where they are, too. They published a collection of Stan's short stories, and I think it was high time somebody published a collection of Robinson's short stories, but short story collections, everybody knows, don't do as well as novels. Tor went out on a limb for Stan, and it's not at all surprising that he stays there. Just as Ace went out on a limb for me. In the meantime, though, I was actually writing another novel for Del Rey. Judy-Lynn was editing it -- it's a prequel to my first two Del Rey novels. And a little nastier than my first two Del Rey novels, it's not nearly as nice, it's not as sweet. The protagonist is a

sort of crotchety old piratical guy. Suffice it to say that after I submitted the novel, which was, heaven knows, about two months before Judy-Lynn died, she wrote back and said, "Look, this is not as nice as your earlier books. I'd like you to sweeten it up by rearranging things and putting the cute elves in earlier and having them say funny things." It simply went against the grain by that point, because I had been writing books for Ace that nobody required to be nice or sweet...

GC: And probably writing books in which nobody had asked for changes of that style or degree.

JB: And I didn't want to write another nice book. Consequently I was sort of up in the air about what to do about it, because she was asking for some fairly significant changes. I edited it heavily, cleaned it all up, did as much to it as I thought I could do and then Judy-Lynn died, and the book was sort of orphaned. Lester didn't much like the book. It was Judy-Lynn who was a Blaylock enthusiast.

GC: What's it called?

JB: **The Stone Giant**. It'll be out in June. That's one book that was written out of order, it was written before **Land of Dreams** and after **Homunculus**. It was simply sitting at Del Rey waiting for so long that I caught up and passed it, and then when Ace bought it along with **The Last Coin**, they decided to publish **The Last Coin** first.

GC: **Land of Dreams**...well, it's not my favorite. **Last Coin** is my favorite. And I don't really know why I have this feeling about **Land of Dreams**, I guess because I don't think it works as well as **Homunculus** or **Digging Leviathan**, and I don't know why.

JB: There's a certain sort of reader who likes the eccentricities and world view of **Digging Leviathan** and **The Last Coin**. And there's a certain reader who simply does not like it nor understand it.

GC: One thing I noticed in **Land of Dreams** was that the camaraderie of the children reminded me of "The Body," Stephen King's novella [filmed as "Stand By Me"].

JB: That's interesting. I hadn't read Stephen King at the time. I saw

the film later on and, yeah, I can understand what you mean.

GC: They're individuals. Most kid stories you've got your protagonist kid and the others are just hangers-on, they're not as fleshed out as the protagonist. Whereas these three kids each have their own hopes and...

JB: To the point at which it's hard to tell who the protagonist is supposed to be.

GC: Right.

JB: To the point at which, Skeeze, the fat kid, becomes a far more interesting character than the protagonist. In fact, the protagonist works throughout the story as a kind of straight man. He delivers the straight lines and Skeeze says the funny things, and pretty soon it starts to seem as if Skeeze is a much more interesting character. **Land of Dreams** is actually a novel which I had outlined in two or three different forms way back to a date preceding my writing of **Elfin Ship**. It featured a protagonist who was withdrawn, bookish, a little bit alienated -- a character much like I was when I was growing up. Also I tend to be a little bit of a wallflower. That's just the way I am, and is the way my main character turned out. I think that's fine and dandy in the real world. In a novel there might be drawbacks to it. He was an honest character, but he's not interesting. Also, I think I write better closer to home.

GC: The age difference was really hard to overcome?

JB: I'm more of an age with Andrew Vanbergen. Also, it was pretty easy to research **The Last Coin**. I'd call Powers up and we'd drive down to Seal Beach, California and drink some beers and hit this café and that donut shop and walk out on the pier and look around, you know. Did that several times to get the mood of the place, and combined that with my childhood memories of it to come up with the setting. Right now today, donut shops and bars and cafés are things that I'm vitally interested in. I mean they're the bits and pieces that provide most of the get-up-and-go in my life, my using them as the backdrop had a lot more fire to it, a lot more jazz, a lot more authenticity than the substantially made-up

northern California landscape that I had used before in **Land of Dreams**.

GC: One thing I do notice about **Land of Dreams** is that even in the "real part" it still seems like a dream. And that could be part of the non-authenticity coming in, because it's described in a more dream-like manner and I thought maybe it was a conscious decision with the title.

JB: I don't know if it was a conscious decision with the title so much as a conscious decision on my part to try to mythologize northern California. Having seen most of the United States in my life, I have to say that there is no more beautiful place in the world than northern California. It's simply a startling, strange place, and I'm so affected by places, by settings...that, in a number of the pieces I've written, and especially in **Land of Dreams**, I've made an effort to mythologize places. Once again to try to force the reader to see that place through my eyes. I'm a real big fan of the notion that places are really magical, and I don't mean "rabbit out of the hat" or "witches and cauldrons" or any of that kind of crap -- I mean that they have an irrational effect on the way we feel, on how we view the world, and, artistically, I always thought it would be nice to paint a picture northern California. I tried to do it in "Paper Dragons," too, in such a way as to make the reader feel about the place as I felt about the place.

GC: Did you grow up in Seal Beach?

JB: I was born in Long Beach, which is adjacent to Seal Beach, and then I grew up in Orange County, but I used to go down to Seal Beach with my father all the time, fish off the pier and off the rocks.

GC: Because I was thinking about the quote, "You can never go home." But when you go home it evokes so many memories, it is magical. Because it brings that up.

JB: I talked about this with Stan Robinson at one time. He moved to Switzerland for two years and immediately started writing about Orange County. I asked him if he thought it was easier to get the spirit of the place in literature when you were removed from it,

when you were sort of nostalgic and sentimental about it and thinking about it a lot. He agreed that probably that was the case. And I think it was moving away from northern California that made me realize exactly how it had affected me -- magically like that. On the other hand, since then I've written a short story set in downtown Orange where I live. My main character lives on Pine Street right where I live. That story will come out in *OMNI* sometime next year, and once again it's a story in which I attempt to show what it is about the place that keeps me there and that will keep keeping me there.

GC: How many short stories have you done?

JB: I don't know, I think ten, eleven--something like that.

GC: Publish them all? JB: They've all been published. Since my first sale, I've only written one short story, that I can think of, that did not get published. It might have if I had kept sending it out, but I realized it had some heavy flaws and so I killed it and turned it into **Homunculus**. It was the idea of this skeleton navigating this blimp around perpetually. Didn't work as a story at all. In fact it was set in the future. Why there should be a skeleton in a blimp in 2010, I don't know. It wasn't a very good story, so I scrapped it. That's the only one. Knock on wood.

GC: You're not really known as a short story writer even though that seems to be...well, ten stories is not prodigious but it's still quite a few.

JB: No, I think...let me see, I sold my first short story to *Unearth* magazine back in 1975, and now it's 1988 and that means that if I published ten of them, and I think that it's ten or eleven, that's less than...

JB & GC: ...one a year.

JB: So, maybe, regardless of the quality of those stories, I haven't quite put 'em out often enough to attract very much attention along those lines.

GC: But it's enough for a collection. [laughter]

JB: Well, nearly enough for a collection, although half of them are contemporary pieces, and the other half are neo-Victorian short

stories having to do with the same characters as **Homunculus**.

GC: We were figuring out that we oughta change--instead of calling everything "punk," we ought to call it "stuff." So what y'all write should be "Steamstuff."

JB: Well, I thought that Bruce [Sterling] was absolutely right when he said that what we Powers and I are interested in is "stuff." I know that Powers and I are both attracted to spectacle. And, if there's one thing that the Victorian age had, it was a whole lot of spectacle. I mean, the streets of London were full of beggars and prostitutes and lords and all kinds of different carriages going up and down. There were markets all over the place, raw fish, coffee houses and coffee vendors, pea-pod men, lord knows what--I mean, the streets were full of stuff. And for a writer like myself, who's a big fan of stuff, to all of a sudden realize that here's grist for the mill for who knows how many years... Also there's one thing, I suppose, that did come up on that panel last night and that's that I was a literature major for years at school, took a lot of classes in Victorian poetry, prose and novels and history and had a real affinity, stylistically, for Victorian prose. I think that my writing style such as it is, I don't want to put too fine a point on this, was affected by Dickens and Stevenson and Thackery and by 18th century writers like Laurence Sterne. Consequently it's not surprising that I came out of the blocks with a head full of Victoriana and lunacy. Powers, I think, comes largely from the same academic background. So, it wasn't merely the stuff, it was also a natural inclination to write that way.

GC: You mention "Victorian period" to people and they immediately think "strait-laced." "Victorian" seems to have become a buzz-word, at least in today's society except for those in the know, that it was sexually repressed. But that's not true, is it?

JB: I don't think it's true at all, though I think the literature was sexually repressed. You don't find Stevenson or Dickens or Thackery dealing with sex realistically. I think the French were dealing with it just a little bit, Stendhal, for example. No, the Victorians suppressed it on the surface. They had all kinds of nasty

habits and the only real rule was they couldn't bring them up in public. Oscar Wilde brought them up in public and they jailed him. They said, "Oscar, just stand up in court and deny it and we're not going to bother you," and he said to hell with that, stood up in court and did not deny it and they killed him, essentially. We're living in an age now where people can say anything they choose; sometimes we wish they'd shut up. Sometimes I admire that aspect of the Victorians. But no, I think that there was a surface gloss, but under the surface they were a seething mass of weird corruption. I think I read somewhere that there were more prostitutes in Victorian London than in any other city in the world at the time, maybe even since. There's a lot of strange stuff there, a lot of strange stuff.

GC: We didn't talk much about **The Digging Leviathan**. I think you said before that this is your favorite book?

JB: Well, up until **The Last Coin**. **The Last Coin** has supplanted it as my favorite, but up until then, yeah, it was my favorite. I understand that there are readers out there who can't understand it.

GC: People have mentioned to me, "Why does Blaylock stop right when the story gets interesting?"

JB: Well, that was actually one of the questions that Susan Allison at Ace Books had--she ended up being my editor for a time, in between Beth Meacham and Ginjer Buchanan. She's utterly certain that the book stops right when it gets going. They're on their way to the damn center of the Earth and they never get there.

GC: Right! We've got the machine going, let's go!

JB: I was determined that these people were never going to get out of Glendale, because what I was interested in there was what was going on in the garage. How are these people filling their days? I was far more interested in the little eccentric details of the book than any kind of notion of getting them down into the center of the Earth to stab dinosaurs or something like that. Whether that was good judgment on my part, I don't know. It was at least honest.

GC: It's quite different.

JB: Again, it's pretty close to my heart. It turned out to be what I

wanted it to be. Of course, I wrote it a long time ago. If I wrote it now, it might be different. **The Last Coin**, I think, is a better book for the simple reason that I got to use those eccentricities that I love, but I also learned something about plotting over the years.

GC: All of your books, that I know of, have that end except for **The Digging Leviathan**. They all get wrapped up and its usually a pleasing and happy ending. Have you read **Bones of the Moon** by Jonathan Carroll? [*Glen is referring here to the British edition, which has a substantially different ending from the American one.* -- Ed.]

JB: No, I've read **Land of Laughs**.

GC: I just finished **Bones of the Moon** the other day and I was so surprised. On the whole he was fairly whimsical -- he had a couple of dark undertones but nothing really surprising. But the ending is horrifying; that last chapter shocks you totally. You say, "Wait a minute! That didn't happen!" It's not bad, it's just not what you were expecting.

JB: He did the same thing in **Land of Laughs**.

GC: It's "Wait! Stop! No!" I was wondering if this is a world view-point -- "I want to end this happy" or is that just one of Jonathan Carroll's peculiarities.

JB: I don't know. In **Digging Leviathan** it was a conscious choice. It's a book about people pursuing their dreams, and Ashbless and the villains and the principal characters are all pursuing a different version of the same dream. And I thought that the most honest ending for the book would be for them to be in hot pursuit of that dream, in their various...

GC: [interrupting] Before they fail...if they were about to fail.

JB: Sure.

GC: So you don't know.

JB: No, you don't know. It might be a platitude or a cliché to suggest this but I'm moderately convinced that it is the pursuit of the dream that is of value. I don't know where the hell they thought they were going, but once they got there they were just going to have to come home again. It's not an epic quest sort of thing, where

at the end you lop off the bad man's head and restore the ring of power. This was simply them going about their business in their weird way down out in Glendale and Eagle Rock. And I wanted to end it that way. What the hell would I do with them at the center of the Earth? Also, who knows whether they could even have gotten to the center of the Earth? I think they probably could have, otherwise there are some pretty inexplicable aspects of the book. A funny thing that William Gibson told me: he said he went into a specialty bookstore in Vancouver and said, "Do you have **The Digging Leviathan** by James Blaylock?" and the guy said, "What do you want that for?" And he said, "Well, uh, a couple of people told me it was pretty good, and, you know, why do you want any book?" And the guy looks at him and says, "Yeah, I've got it. Do you know if it's supposed to be funny?" [laughter] And I thought, that's great. There are people mystified by the book, absolutely mystified. That's healthy. They didn't know whether I was serious, not serious, crazy... I was deadly serious--especially about our not taking ourselves so damned seriously. I also wanted it to be funny. At the end of **The Horse's Mouth**, Gulley Jimson is dying, but he won't stop talking philosophy to Nosy, and the nurse says to him, "It's dangerous for you to talk, you're very seriously ill." And he says, "Not so seriously as you're well."