

CHTHONICA EPISODE #1: INTERVIEW WITH LAIRD BARRON ON THE WORLDS, METAPHYSICS, INFLUENCES, AND--YES--DOGS IN HIS HORROR FICTION

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Greg Greene: I'm here with Laird Barron, the writer of horror and weird fiction primarily as he's known. I'm just going to ask Laird some questions. Laird, how are you doing today?

Laird Barron: I'm doing fine, thanks for having me on.

GG: Absolutely. So, let me start with two of my favorite subjects which are metaphysics and metanarrative. In particular, trying to understand the whole body of your work. So I've read through all of your published fiction and I know that at least the vast majority of your stories--let's say "The Cyclorama" from the James Bond *Licensed Expired* book notwithstanding, clearly that's in the James Bond world--but most of your fiction falls into the world of Old Leech, but that world has different facets to it, obviously. So I could put any given story into the Our World/Real World version of the Old Leech universe, and there is also Antiquity, this dark fantasy universe. How do you distinguish those? Are there more than two worlds within that universe, in your view?

LB: I don't want to give a complete answer because I think that ruins some of the mystery. I'll say a couple of things. Antiquity, which would be the Rumpelstiltskin, dealing with fables and legends and putting my spin on them. That's essentially the only writing that I do in the weird/horror genres that I consider to be supernatural, in the sense of magic, things that probably couldn't happen, or could only happen in the imagination. At least in the form, in the format that I bring them forth. There's almost an animated quality, or animation quality I should say, to

the Antiquity stuff. When I write those stories I actually see them in vivid colors and claymation...

GG: *The Spine of Night* or Ralph Bakshi-style rotoscope...

LB: Yeah! Actually, that was some of my first... I was raised on that stuff, so... I watched that before I read *The Lord of the Rings*. I read *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Hobbit* the first thing, but I watched those cartoons, if you want to call them that, these works of animated films, these beautiful films, before I actually read those.

The Antiquity stuff, I look at that stuff as magic, it's pure fantasy. The rest of it takes place in probably two universes, and they overlap, and who's to say which is real, which is ours and which isn't? I don't think it matters. I think one is and one isn't, but which is which?

And I have a tendency... the reason I don't consider the Old Leech stuff, for example, or the Imago Sequence to be related to fantasy or magic in the same way that some of my sword and sorcery and high fantasy is, is because they deal with concepts that we just haven't fully... we haven't been able to put a label on 'em. We don't know what they are, so there are things bigger than us, there are mysterious forces, and so we have a tendency to call them, we label them. I personally find that they are just this huge playground for me to deal with. I kind of have to deal with them. I feel like if you're writing, especially contemporary fiction, you have to deal with, whether you are a believer, a Christian, or whether you're a Muslim, or whether you are an atheist, you're still dealing with civilizations' folklore, their codes, their customs, their ethos. That's kind of how I approach it. I approach it all, not in an exploitative sense, like in a mercenary sense, but more how I come to understand it. We were talking about it before the show: it's a way of investigating my own beliefs or interrogating my own suppositions.

GG: I have, in going through some of the stories, found some connections between the... I know talking about them as different worlds, or something, is maybe more for folks who really care about continuity. When I was a Marvel comics-reading kid back in the '80s, continuity was a big deal. Now I'm much more interested in the impact of narrative and what that means. It has been interesting to go through and see... even the Nanashi stories. Nanashi, I saw in the short story "We Used Swords in the '70s", works as a custodian for SWORD Enterprises which kind of connects him in sorta maybe but there are some details there that make you think it's kinda like the real world, but not fully.

Some of your stories, in particular the novel *The Light is the Darkness* and *X's for Eyes*, the writing style is like... *X's for Eyes* is like a story was written in the Johnny Quest world (LB: *agreement sound*) and published in Playboy magazine in 1973. It's so wild in what the protagonists in particular do, it's a little bit different from the classic horror stories from *The Imago Sequence*, *Occultation*, and *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All*. Do you consider that a separate world?

LB: I think that it is, because in my mind, that world... I have intentions, I don't know if they'll come to fruition, I'm getting older every day, but to follow those two, to have two or three novellas for each decade.

GG: Oh, wow.

LB: So, I would have a couple to follow up *X's for Eyes*, there'd be a couple set in the '60s, and obviously they get older. They're superhuman. By the end of the first one they're turning into superheroes. My conception of their reality is that it may be a third reality, or even a fourth reality: there's going to be jetpacks, soldiers--our military is going to be wearing bubble-helmets and firing plasma rifles, and yet there's going to be this weird retro thing.

That was intentionally written as a pulp--not quite a parody. I don't think I've ever really done a parody. I've done satire. I wasn't trying to send up pulp. I was trying to write it more faithfully, like you would get in a men's magazine in the fifties.

GG: Yes, exactly.

LB: But not 100%. I still wanted to do my own thing with it. It's definitely risqué for even something that would have been in a men's magazine, some of the concepts in it. I injected some cynicism into it. Some contemporary cynicism, which is not to say that I was mocking it, but a little bit more of an edge to it.

It was written, well, you've read all my stuff, as you've mentioned, it's different. So is *The Light is the Darkness*. They are fundamentally different from almost everything else, and that was intentionally so.

The Light is the Darkness, I really should have--I was kind of going through a dark spot then so I didn't really have my wits together--but if I were to go back, and I probably will re-issue it one of these days, I would explicitly make known that it's an homage to Roger Zelazny. There's a reason why the characters speak the way they do, there's a reason why I use a lot of the language that I use in it. It was intentional. And why it's so byzantine and plodding, that had a lot to do with a tip of the hat to *My Name Is Legion*, *Roadmarks*, things like that, *Roadmarks* would be a big one, *This Immortal*, more so than--*The Lord of Light* is one of my favourite novels, and I like the *Nine Princes in Amber*, this might have a taste of that, but it's more *Roadmarks* and *This Immortal* and *My Name is Legion*. There's just these basically byzantine, interconnected things are going on but you're not even sure who/what the characters are, they're just sort of *in media res*, they come and they go, and you're basically just along for a ride. And that was what, actually both those, the novella and the short novel, kinda designed, they're working, for good or ill, they're working as designed.

GG: One of the most interesting characters, to me, is--I'm not quite sure how to pronounce it--it's Tom, is it MAN-DI-BOLE, MAN-DI-BOLAY?

LB: MAN-DI-BO-LAY.

GG: Mandibole. He appears in various forms and avatars across... even in "More Dark" he appears as a puppet. I think he's in Antiquity.

LB: Yep.

GG: He's in *X's for Eyes*, and "Mobility", and then he shows up in an Isaiah Coleridge novel as well. And these are--they may be completely different people--it makes me think of the way the Hernandez brothers were doing the *Love and Rockets* comics back in the '80s, where the same character shows up in the normal, dramatic, slice-of-life pieces, as well as the science fiction stuff (LB: Yep.) and they're very comedic or very serious. It's the same person, but they're used in completely different stories. There's something about that character, Tom Mandibole, is such a... smarmy and very dangerous at the same time might be the best way to describe him.

LB: Well, I'll say this about my philosophy in general. At first I was very studiously lining everything up that I ever did. After a while I said no, this is the wrong way to do this. There is going to be a certain kind of reader who wants to line everything up, well it's going to frustrate them because it doesn't 100% line up. It's a jigsaw puzzle and there are some pieces--it's a 2000-piece jigsaw puzzle and some of the pieces don't fit correctly. Or they may even belong to a different puzzle. You can get them in there but...

And the reason that I do that is... it's for multiple, multiple reasons. Some of it is stubbornness. It's a situation where I do play fair in the sense that there is enough continuity that, if you want to argue on a particular story, that it lines up with something, you are within your rights to do so. In other words, I

try to give different readers cover. I realize that no one, even if it is explicit, no one will ever abandon their position when they believe something.

And I think it is actually the worst thing in the world when the Eagles go *Hotel California doesn't mean anything*, or *Hotel California means this*. We don't care. We don't really want a definitive answer. We want Glenn Frey to nod and to go *the Devil eh? Well, maybe...*We want to be able to make it make sense for ourselves.

So much of what we do, and I say *we*, anybody who makes art, anyone, whether you do it professionally, amateur on the side, whatever. A big part of it is the subconscious. You don't create unless you are possessed, you're not creating out of a vacuum. You are either, as the Greeks would say, you are a vessel, genius is just a vessel of the gods. You are a filter. Or you are an engine and you're grinding up, you're a mill, and you're grinding up all that stuff that you eat, that you take in. So you can take as much credit or as little credit for everything. I take credit for stuff that I didn't intend. Why? Because it came out of me. Why did it come out of me? Because I put stuff into me. For good or for ill.

What I've decided is that instead of making it all--you'll inevitably mess it up, you'll inevitably miss this--I've decided that it makes enough sense that someone who wants to see it that way is correct. Not *it's okay*. No, they're correct. They're absolutely correct. But there's also enough incongruity and angles that don't meet that there's another interpretation.

I have this love/hate affair with coincidence. I think coincidence is something that we don't understand. Coleridge has come to believe that coincidence doesn't exist, but that's partially the writer defending artistic choices. *Well, of course they did this, because I had to have them meet because otherwise there would be no story*. So it's a meta-thing. Coleridge is aware of his god, to some degree. He's like *I think this is all part of a plot. What's that typing sound I keep hearing?*

The other thing is, I love the idea of alternate... This is one of the reasons that I do things the way I do generally speaking, where I'll have Delia. Delia is an heiress in the Coleridge series. She's a black magician in my Antiquity series. She's one of the worst people alive.

GG: Oh, that's right, yes.

LB: She's a very dangerous--she commands a flock, a cruelty of the Flat Affect Men. A version of her was in a story called "Girls Without Their Faces On." And there's others. She keeps reappearing. She's not the same person in all of them, but she is.

Sometimes what it is, if someone has specifically the same name as someone else's in a different story. They're either the same person--here are the further adventures of this person, they're intersecting with my world again. Or, they're another version of that person. I love playing with that because that way, I'm kind of saying to myself and anybody who chooses to read between the lines, I'm basically saying *if not but for the grace of (choose your deity, your higher power) that could have been his fate or her fate.*

GG: Interesting! Oh wow.

LB: In this reality--and you know this goes back to Zelazny, the idea of the Shadow. One of the stories starts off, he met a knight who was dying, but he killed seven men, he goes *if I'd walked into a different Shadow, the knight would have been unharmed and all seven men would have been dead, in yet another Shadow, they would have been laughing over his corpse, etc and so forth.* None of them are correct. I should say they're all equally correct. I do that a lot.

GG: Like a quantum narrative, I guess.

LB: Actually, I think that's a much more succinct way of putting it. I've fallen in love with the idea of *sometimes they're the same person*. Especially the Antiquity stories, when I have a storyline, it's pretty easy because I'll give you clues. I'll say *oh yeah, the last time you were following this character they were a truck driver and they're still a truck driver, they were a black magician in the last story, well they're still...* you know. So you know that's the same version of that person.

Where you might get confused is Julie V [five] the cheerleader vs Julie Vellum or Julie V who is also a black magician along with Delia.

GG: Oh yes, yes.

LB: The heiress Delia or the black magician Delia... The thing is, they kind of are the same person, they're just in different realities.

GG: I think it's the story *The Blood in my Mouth*, which is one of your later stories. At the end of it you've got the image of the Black Kaleidoscope, and it's all these different--and I started to make this connection--and they're actually moving, sort of, in the story, between worlds. There's different realities and they're able to somehow travel between something.

And I'm thinking, *Wait, the Black Kaleidoscope, it's all these different facets of the same world, the same base, the same souls, maybe.*

LB: The same universe.

GG: Or moving between. Looking back on "Strappado", I noticed a character named Walther, but he's got an "h" - W A L T H E R. That's such a weird spelling. Hold on a second. I found Walther Neck in "Ode to Joad to Toad." They're both kind of these big personality characters who are kind of rough edged and vulgar.

LB: Sure.

GG: I wondered if maybe it's the avatar of... Walther in "Strappado" is Walther Neck.

LB: And as I'm sure you know, Stephen King is another person who has done something similar to this. He did it in a different way. I should say I do it in a different way because I came along much later. The idea of the Territories, that we have doubles. The Star Trek mirror...that's why I'm saying we're a product of everything we have ever taken in.

GG: Yes.

LB: The other thing is that, one reason is that I have overlapping narratives, and that I'll repeat certain things. You'll find phrases throughout all my stories. I'll have certain phrases, and I'll even have scenes recur over and over again in stories. There's two reasons I did it. The main reason I did it is because I think it's interesting. If you're lucky enough to have a career, you get to have your *blue period* and your *red period* and all this good stuff, and then all your stuff can interact. Over time your art can interact positively or negatively. That's neat.

I became aware early on though that I--and I think I probably speak for most writers--am a victim and a beneficiary of unexamined assumptions. I didn't realize until about 8-9 years ago how much Poe had directly influenced me. Even though I never talk about Poe, I love Poe. You don't talk about the mountain. It's the mountain. You go out and get your well water, and the mountain's there. Every now and then you might stop and look at it *wow, it's beautiful today* or you know *ugh, there's a storm coming*. It's there.

GG: Yes.

LB: It's so big that it's just part of the landscape. What I realized though is that, because of him, I am completely obsessed with

live burial. How many of my stories had some allusion to or even a scene of burial in them? Live burial.

What that taught me--and I started going through my work going *wow*, how many times do I have a character doing this or that--is that part of that is inescapable. If you write enough, there are only so many ways to put things, and our brains--we are all really geared toward, no matter how versatile we are geared toward a finite amount of things that basically excite our interest.

If you look at Peter Straub, he has written multiple novels about a group of friends who must confront evil later in life. So has Stephen King. Straub more so. *Koko* is like that, *Ghost Story* is like that. The Chowder Society. In *Koko* it's the four Vietnam veterans. Instead of Alma Mobley, it's Koko, that's the monster. The point is that he keeps going back to it.

Years ago, Stephen King, when someone was complaining that *man, you keep repeating these different themes* he goes *if I were a rocker, and I were writing love albums, ballads about love, you would say* ah, here's his take on this kind of love, unrequited love, and here are some murder ballads, love gone wrong, *if I were a musician you'd praise me for it*. He's right. As long as you're doing it in an innovative way, and not just repeating yourself. So what I've decided is, you don't wrestle with your influence, you jiu-jitsu it, you go with it. You don't try to defeat it--you're playing. We're not having a real fight: we're sparring. We're interacting in a kind of performance.

What I decided is *no, intentionally repeat names; intentionally have scenes recur; make it work. Instead of doing it completely unconsciously, be very conscious in my choices*. That's why in some of my collections--like in *The Beautiful Thing*, there's a hunting that opens it up, and there's a hunting story before the end. I actually considered having it be at the end, but for other reasons, it didn't work. "More Dark" had to be the outro. If you'll notice, they kind of bookend each other though. I think there's

even the same amount of--if I did it right--there's roughly the same amount of hunters in both.

GG: Oh wow, wow.

LB: What they're doing is completely--initially, I was *oh, can I have two hunting expeditions of manly men with no women, very similar kinds of stories, in one book?* Well, of course you can, as long as it's intentional. As long as you are working towards something when you do this.

GG: (Pulls book from shelf) Yeah. I hadn't thought about that. "Blackwood's Baby" and *The Men from Porlock*. That's right. I can't look at this table of contents, because I have enough questions already to ask you.

(Laughs)

GG: That brought to mind. There was the beginning of one of Neil Young's concerts that was captured live. He starts playing and someone yells, *It all sounds the same*. And Neil just shoots back, *That's because it's all part of the same song*. And yeah, it is. He's going to keep working those same questions. We struggle with this--I've told my kids from the time they were pretty young, *lean in to what fascinates you*. There's some reason that it's there. Why? Because of genetics; the way you were raised; because God has given you some calling; whatever it is that's in there, or all of these things, there's something that fascinates you and that probably has to do with whatever you will uniquely contribute to the world. And in the training is, *Let's make whatever you contribute something good, that helps people out*.

One other--within the scope of your stories--question of metaphysics. I noticed it in the last novel that I read of yours, *The Light is the Darkness*, the phrase *Time is a Ring*. That's a refrain that I see quite a bit.

LB: *agreement sound*

GG: Am I to take that as metaphysical or metaphorical within the scope of the stories that you tell?

LB: I'd say both. It's one of my--they always say *don't conflate the artist with their work*, and I think that's a safe--obviously I'm not a big game hunter. I was raised hunting and fishing but, sport--I don't do it anymore, because I don't have to--and I abhor... let's just say that I have a very righteous hatred for people who go shoot elephants and do things that some of my characters do. Even if I don't--to me good writing is you don't preach. There's a time to preach, I mean it depends, if that's what you want to do. But, your characters just have to be the character and people have to make conclusions.

I've been seeing a lot of arguments lately like *it's fine to have an unsympathetic character like the big game hunter, but you've got to punish him at some point, it needs to be part of the narrative that he's punished*. That's not how the world works.

GG: That's not how the world is.

LB: Not even in my fantasy world, it doesn't work that way. Now I don't think that the evil always prevails, either. I think that's also--both ends of that spectrum are ridiculous.

The time deal is one of my actual pet theories. I'm not sure whether I believe it, but I think time is... I remember I was reading, I forget what the theory is called. Essentially, there are all these theories about the big bang, and what's going on with the universe, and that it's expanding. I remember one theory, where if you can somehow get to the edge of the universe, the bleeding edge of reality, it would compress you, basically you would get narrower and narrower and you would actually get flattened. If you were able to travel in your physical form, like Superman, zoom out to the edge of, not the universe but the edge of all of creation, it actually is like a blade. You would cease to exist because there is no room for you to exist there.

That was one theory. But the other theory was--you know how a fountain works? You've got a base of water and it shoots up, and it looks like a different stream of water coming out of the angel's mouth, but it's just the water cycling. It's the same water going through. That was another theory about the universe. It is constantly going through itself. If you recycle the water through the fountain, or you pull a slinky through itself, or a sock, it just constantly turns into itself over and over again.

And that--I can't remember if this was maybe my interpretation--some of the *déjà vu*, and some of the weird things that happen with time--that maybe it's not always 100% the same, because the slinky moves left or right a few millimetres. Unless you have it on a machine going through the same exact angle at the same speed, possibly there's: *this time it went through like this; maybe it wobbled a little bit*. That's how we could get the idea of free will. That determinism vs. you can have a little control over your destiny. Maybe you do, maybe you can go a little left or a little right next time.

Time is a ring. That was something that I came up with early. Very early: that was in the third or fourth story. I was also exploring the possibility that the universe isn't antiseptic. That the universe is dirty. Look at the processes of all--there could be life forms out there that are very clean and just made of light and music. The celestial...

GG: The music of the spheres.

LB: Yeah. But generally speaking, it's all about stomach acids and semen and blood and effluvia and all this stuff. So I was like *alright, it's an organic--the universe is very organic*. There's even theories that it's a cellular structure.

GG: Wow. Really.

LB: Yeah. I just like the idea that a lot of things that happen is via osmosis. In other words, something passing through a semipermeable membrane. Something seeping through. Whether that's--I think technically, it would be a liquid. The idea is the same though: that gravity seeps in from somewhere else; that pieces of our reality are not necessarily nascent to our reality, that they come in through the wall of whatever the universe is. That maybe we're just a tiny little fragment of something unimaginably larger even than our feeble brains can comprehend.

I also said that *time is a muscle, it contracts*. That the ring--like an anus...

GG: Sphincter.

LB: ...is a muscle that contracts. The reason that I chose ring--I do have a bone to pick with [Nic] Pizzolatto, because Pizzolatto has his *time is a flat circle*. Right, we know where you got that.

The bottom line though is--people like it, but I find it to be--if I had wanted to say that, I would have said that. We had a discussion one time on email, I don't know if I explained to him, but I told him when I was a kid, my conception of time, of all time being simultaneous and yet discrete, was from a phrase that god said something to the effect of *I created time for man, I stand outside of time*. I went *huh, what would that look like? Oh my god*. If you had a mosaic of movie screens or tv screens and they were all perfectly flat--Jurassic period is playing on this screen, wedged up against it a few million years later, you have our time, and they're all playing simultaneously. So it is true that they are all happening at the same time, but you're trapped in your little flatland--I don't know if you read *Flatland* when you were younger, but it talks about this, it talks about what--if something comes down from the fourth dimension or the fifth dimension, what would that look like? What would a being that had more dimensions than us seem like?

GG: Which *Interstellar* plays with a little bit.

LB: And Ted Chiang plays to that kind of stuff all the time. The point is that this was my time. So he was like *oh time is a flat ring, or a flat circle*, but that's an incomplete view. The reason that I call it a ring, is that there's a fucking hole in the middle of it. That's the void. That's the unknowable. That's the bottomless pit, maybe where everything comes from, initially.

GG: Where things are starting to use the process of osmosis and coming through the membrane.

LB: Or, if you fall off that ring--'cause a ring can be broken, that's why I have the broken circle. The ring is--when it's working correctly--this is what time does, but who's to say... you can smack a ring, you can break a ring. Who knows, the pieces--if you're on a ring you can fall off it. I don't think it matters to really over-explain it. I chose a ring. I could have chosen a wheel, I could have chosen a circle. I could have done that. But, I'm like *no*. The idea of a ring... a ring is terrifying, because a ring is a great unifier: you slide your finger through a hole. But it's also--it can signify something far more...

GG: Inescapability.

LB: Yeah *doubtful* and also...

GG: Something that loops forever.

LB: ...right, and the unknowable. What is this that it's circling? It's a question that I don't think requires an answer. I just think it's more interesting than saying that it's flat and that's what it is. I think that there is a question of--there's your mystery, the mystery is what are we circling around? I hope it's not a drain. It could be a drain.

GG: Ok, that's fascinating, thank you. I was wondering if it was related to Nietzsche, the idea of eternal recurrences, where

you're just stuck in--this is going to be repeated, eventually. Every possible configuration of everything will eventually be repeated.

LB: Buddhism. The idea of standing outside time was from the Bible. The idea of the Eternal Champion, eternal recurrence, that can come from... well, the Bible too, to some degree, but also from other philosophies. I am sure that I absorbed it from all sorts of sources. It's not like--my take on it is just my take. The concept is an old concept.

GG: Ok, awesome. Shifting a little bit and talking about some broad themes in a number of your works. Your protagonists, like Isaiah Coleridge, and even Rex, the cybernetic war dog, the last dog on Earth, they are brutal, but not brutish. In fact in both of those cases, these are highly intelligent protagonists. I'm trying to come up with the words for it--and the words I came up with are, they live close to the earth, they're close to the line between life and death. How do you think of their characters, and their relationship with violence? Does their prowess at death-dealing in some way ennoble them? Tell me a little bit about those characters.

LB: Coleridge is the easier for me to delineate and to talk about because he comes from a tradition of the tarnished knight. I took it all the way back to the tarnished mythological hero. I wanted him to be more reflective of--what he may be potentially capable of doing, almost the ridiculous punishment that he can take or dish out. But also, some of his ideas of nobility--if you look at what Homer was writing about--you go to all kinds of traditions, Siegfried, the Norse mythology with Thor, and the unsanitized fairy tales. Any kind of lore that's old lore, that's not been sanitized, has a tendency to be very brutal, even in its kindness. The kindnesses are *I'll give you a quick death*, is their idea of kindness. Or *I won't screw you over as much as I--I'll just kill you, I won't screw over your family*. You know, that kind of stuff. If you look at Odysseus--Odysseus lied, cheated, fornicated left and right and by gum, by Zeus, he would have been pretty

mad if Penelope had cheated on him while he was gone. Achilles was essentially kind of whiny and petulant--*I'm going to go kill 300 people because I'm in a mood now.*

GG: He's very petulant, yes.

LB: Hector is this honorable man who is doing the honorable thing. There is no question that Hector was honorable. *But I'm going to castrate him or drag him by his nuts behind my team of horses after we go to battle.* No honor, by our standards, but by theirs it was perfectly--this was all reasonable.

So Coleridge is a person of his time, he doesn't get to be *that*. I wasn't interested in being that far gone. But he leans--the shadow on his shoulder is the shadow of Achilles and Beowulf and *might is right* kind of reasoning, and he's very much--he's always struggling with that. I don't think that the violence itself is ennobling. I think his struggle with it, to some degree, is ennobling. I also think that the paradox is that he doesn't really think that he can be redeemed, so I think in some way--he wouldn't see it this way, but I as a writer see it as a saving grace of his is that he doesn't think that he can be saved.

GG: Oh, wow.

LB: It's kind of the philosophy I have, is that, you can--he touches on it when he talks to Lionel about our relationship with dogs, which is pretty near and dear--and I have a pretty complex, as someone who used to race dogs, I have a pretty complex relationship. Someone who used to kill to eat, without any thought, yet I'd rather hunt hunters, especially sport hunters than any animal. I mean I would never hunt an animal for fun. It's all very complicated, but he doesn't think that a good deed can wash away your sins. And I'm not talking about it in a religious sense. I'm talking about just--how you think about yourself, you now. If you do bad deeds when you're young and good deeds when you're older and wiser, which one are you? Does it depend on how bad the deeds were? If you're a good

person--and a lot in noir--if you'll notice, crime and noir hinge on this, crime even more so--a good person in a bad situation and keeps the money they shouldn't have kept, or they get seduced, or whatever, and then just this train-wreck of things happen to 'em, and it seems to be a statement, at least unconsciously, by society--of which we writers certainly are, film-makers, whatever--is that you're only as good as the last thing you kinda did.

GG: Hmm. Yeah, yes.

Right? So in other words, if you're good your whole life but you mess up and keep that bag of money, well now you're a thief. You're a bad person. You've invited--you messed up. We don't look at you in totality, like a judge actually does, when they give you the sentence. Like society really does, at the end. No, day to day we're like, *You, that jerk that did that?* Well, he used to... *Well, I don't care what he used to do, this is what he did recently.* And so, I'm looking at that going, that's kind of how Coleridge feels. He feels like he can pay down the debt. It goes back to the dog thing. He goes, *We can never repay dogs for what we owe them, we're always just paying off the vig, essentially.*

And so... he did a *lot* of horrible stuff... and I'm talking about not even by our standards, by crime hero standards, anti-hero standards. He murdered people. I just don't dwell on it much. I didn't because I really don't think that a mainstream publisher like Putnam--they were leery already of stuff I was doing. You can't...

GG: Really?

LB: You can't go *Yeah, that time I shot the pregnant lady because the mafia told me to shoot her*, which he would have, he might have. The reason we don't go into that is not because I have any problem talking about that, it's because that's not the narrative for mainstream crime novels, which those were

intended to be and which they were, in some regards, the first two.

But yeah, so redemption is a big deal. To me violence--like my personal philosophy about violence is that it's just a neuter term. It's not different than saying *fire*, *hammer*, right? *Surgery*. The bottom-line is... it's pretty violent taking cancer out of somebody's body.

GG: Yeah. Heart transplant.

LB: You cut it out. SWAT shoots a terrorist or a gunman who's going to murder some kids, I don't think anybody is going to argue about that. So it's the application of the violence. The violence in and of itself--so he looks at violence, very much like it's a weapon. How do you use the weapon? So that's kind of what's going on with him.

As far as Rex goes... Rex is really complicated, and I don't want to drag this out or go into it too far, but I haven't been really able to do--I'm having a hard time grappling with Rex because I have a really complicated... He's by far--him and Jessica Mace are by far the most complicated characters. They're hard to write about. I love to write about them. I feel like I've failed so far to communicate what's really going on with Rex, but I'm working on it.

And these stories are almost all--I just sold one to an anthology, and it pretty much--there's like three other stories--it pretty much retells that story but in a slightly different way. Rex basically, much like the character in *The Croning*, he has memory loss because he has a positronic brain that's been damaged... so he's constantly, the little nanobots that repair him can't repair the crack. He talks about the crack that goes through everything, well it goes through part of his brain, and can never be--so he forgets. It's also the recurring hero, the recurring champion, the Eternal Champion. It's that *You were here before, Rex. You were fighting this battle before and this is what*

happened last time, and now you're... Yeah, Mandibole is in this latest one and they're having a chat about... being immortal, essentially.

GG: Oh my goodness.

LB: Rex is... on one hand he has supra-human intelligence and is basically powered by a computer brain, a consciousness, like an AI, but it is overlaid over a dog.

GG: Yes, and he cares about the things that a dog cares about, which is not quite what humans care about.

LB: That's right, and the reason he does...

GG: That's why it's so fascinating.

LB: ...I haven't really been able--I'm really grappling with it. Part of it is because he's insane. He's functionally insane because he's got damage. In other words, what the design was supposed to be is that you have essentially a drone--a cyborg--that has instincts of a dog, the loyalty of a dog, and can make--they didn't want, they don't want--sapient beings can make decisions, abstract decisions, that a computer, no matter how intelligent, can never make.

And they were just experimenting, and they kind of concluded that maybe it just wasn't a very good idea. So they wanted to give the computer some sort of input. They were playing around with human beings and also with various animals. The implication is there's probably all kinds of cybernetic things out there. We are a cybernetic dog. He exists on multiple realities. Part of him--a large part of him--exists in quantum reality. He can expand his size to several times--he can be the size of a Sherman tank. Right, or he can fold back down to a 300-pound dog, which I kind of touch on in this latest one, but I need to really do a novella about him to just go into all this stuff.

The point is that he's at war with himself because he has almost a split personality. The side of him that is a perfectly balanced computer brain, it's mildly influenced with flesh-and-blood emotion, vs the terrified, hyper-intelligent dog. And now they're co-existing as this--they're not quite split personalities, but they're not working together anymore.

GG: There is this sort of multi-layered symbiotic/cybernetic...

LB: It's hard to write about, let me tell you. I need to do it--I'm thinking of writing a novel about him, so we'll see.

GG: Instead of Isaiah Coleridge--he's great because he's well educated and has a high moral view and he's lived a very brutal life. But even Conrad Navarro, from *The Light is the Darkness*, it seems like his transformation is towards one whose capability of committing violence is greater and greater and greater. And that's not to say that's all he is about but it does seem like that transformation or ennobling of him is one in which he's becoming more capable in his ability to fight and kill.

LB: I think of it in terms of...I've been playing with this in *Hallucigenia*. This is not nascent to this. This comes from Christian--the idea that we come from something much larger than ourselves and that we can return to it. That in the afterlife--I think almost any religious belief--that in the afterlife you're transformed into something that's recognizable but that's different.

GG: Right, that's purer, more glorified, whatever.

LB: And mine has been more like... what if you can go so far that it actually regresses you? You become de-stable. If you look at it from a secular viewpoint... okay, protoplasmic glop, and then through bioelectrical processes, here we are. Well, what happens if that wasn't stable? Basically, it's a mutation process--what if the mutation goes too far?

So, in a lot of those stories, the idea is to go as far as you can but not too far. If you go too far you become--which is very much from Lovecraft, right? Or the X-men. Like I said, nothing comes from a void, it's all from--I see all this stuff, and I'm... even unconsciously... a lot of this stuff I didn't realize what I was doing until after I'd done it. *Oh, that's what...*

The process. I've always just thought, *the process may not be to a being of light and purity with wings, no, you're back to being a puddle. If you go far enough, you collapse right there to divinity, or godhead even, and then boom you push it too far...* like Jenga, you pull and the whole thing collapses back into the pile from which it started.

With Coleridge... the idea is that--I've always planned on if the series was really successful as just a pure crime series to just kind of keep it--to never really go too far with it. If it wasn't ultra-successful, and I was just *do as you will* I was going to tie it back in with, at least to some degree, with Old Leech and all that stuff. The idea is that Coleridge is sort of a vessel, and he's--basically he's not becoming ennobled by the transformation, it's just that he's becoming more in touch with the primordial, or the protean... In other words it's a force of, I want to say nature, but nature writ large, not nature like *there's a wind storm*, no, nature like *the planet was a ball of fire at one time, and it's going to cool to a cinder one day...*

GG: Which harkens back to his Maori--am I saying this right?

LB: Maori...

GG: Maori roots. His grandfather, I think it is, who's this sort of deity-type figure, or figure out of myth and cosmic Maori creation story, and takes on those dimensions in Isaiah's dreams...

LB: Oh, right, his grandfather's in his dreams but basically the dark god Whiro keeps reappearing in his dream, who could--like I said I don't want to give too much...

With Coleridge it was different than anything else. I started off with a template. I was eager to do it. I wanted to write a straight-forward--*Blood Standard* was going to be this straight-forward crime novel. But, you know, there's always room in noir for a touch of the occult, the inexplicable. You just don't go too far with it. Signs and portents are a big thing--even in *No Country for Old Men*, all of McCarthy's work, there's a lot of, *Was that supernatural? Is that this that just happened...?* Or is it that the world is full of mysteries, and you don't have to explain everything, type of thing.

So the idea was to do that, but as time went on he becomes more of this, I was really leaning into the--at first it was going to be Hercules. I was *okay, he's Hercules...* no, or... not Tāne from the Maori--why any of them? Why not be sort of the embodiment of the--I don't want to say *toxic masculine figure*--but the *tragic masculine hero* who lives by violence. Well, what happens to him? Terrible things happen to him. Hercules, Achilles--

GG: Samson.

LB: Odysseus, well Odysseus was okay, but he sort of went through some crap. Siegfried, or Sigurd. Thor, all his buddies. It's a tale as old as time. So I'm like, *Yeah, I can kind of work that into the Coleridge mythos and have him become*--it's sort of a meta- thing, in some ways.

GG: And speaking of Coleridge, another theme I see--it's interesting, I was just going back through "Old Virginia", which you wrote in your early thirties I believe...

LB: *agreement sounds*

GG: And it's preoccupied--a number of your stories are preoccupied with aging. The impact of aging, and the process of aging. Isaiah Coleridge is getting in worse shape with each subsequent novel, and you really see that.

LB: Absolutely.

GG: Maybe that's something I take away most from Coleridge. You see such a realistic and natural progression in his life, in his relationships, in the love he has for Meg and her son, the relationship that they have, where he is kind of a little reluctant or concerned, but is kind of becoming a father-figure. But his own relationship with his body--you were looking at that when you were still quite a young man, in your early thirties. Tell me a little about the process of aging, and why that's such a prominent feature in so many of your works.

LB: It's really strange.

GG: The Broadsword is another good example of that.

LB: There's a lot going on with that. It is actually a central--I would say it's central to my work in general, even though I don't always--obviously not every story touches on it--but it informs almost everything.

Part of it was that I grew up really fast, living in the woods, and was up until the last few years in really really good shape, but also in very bad shape. In other words, I have arthritis, and I knew I was going to have arthritis. What was really bizarre was that when I was writing about Garland in "Old Virginia", I talk about how he was deaf in one ear. I went deaf in my ear a few weeks after I wrote that story.

GG: Oh my goodness.

LB: Something like that. What happened was that I was working at Home Depot and I'd sold one story a couple of years before.

This is in 2001. I believe I wrote this in 2001, I want to say. Anyway, what happened. It could have been early 2000--no it was 2001, because remember I finished it, I sent it off to Gordon Van Gelder at *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and then 9/11 happened five days later. So I sent it off on the 6th of September, and I wrote it quickly. I wrote it in 2 weeks. The reason that I wrote it is I just really did not like working at the place I was working.

It was August, it's 100 degrees out in the brickyard, it was like 90 degrees ambient and I was working down on the brickyard, and I turned to my friend--and, we were being abused by customers, and management, it was terrible. I had worked like 9 days in a row, and I was exhausted, it was pushing me to the limits, and I just turned to my friend and said, *I'm tired of this*. I said, *I'm getting out of here*. And he goes, *You're not quitting?* I said, *No, I'm gonna go home*, I said. *I'm gonna go write*. I said, *It's the only way*--I didn't want to go laterally to some other crappy job, although I kind of did, but it was better.

The point is that I went home and started writing "Old Virginia" and then my ear burst on me not too long after that. I don't know if that was a weird...

GG: It wasn't an accident or something...

LB: No, I had a virus or something. I was just walking. I was walking out of the place for the day, and I collapsed. It felt like from the waist up--I felt like I weighed 500 pounds. I felt like I was made out of lead and I just hit the ground. My friend was walking me and he goes, *You ok?* and a little bit of blood came out and what I found out later was it's a virus. It happened to--Rush Limbaugh is like one of the most famous people it happened to. It travels up the nerves in your ear and it kills them.

So, I've always--I almost broke my back once. I've never had a broken bone except for my nose--my nose and my foot, I've

broken those. But I have been beaten to rat shit many a time. Boxing, fighting, getting thrown off of dog teams. You name it--I've been stomped by a moose. I've had a lot of pain.

But mostly, mostly--wasting my youth, picking up heavy objects and moving them for other people, 8, 10, 12 hours. I've worked in factories.

GG: You were a longshoreman weren't you, at one point?

LB: Fisherman. I should say--processing. I was never really a fisherman, I've worked on fishing boats, and stuff like that, processing.

So, I beat myself up. So I had this weird, this idea that--age is coming for us. I knew--I had a preview from the time I was in my mid-20s. Just running sled dogs 40,000 miles on the back of a team, that beats up your body. My shoulders are all--you know, the pounding that you take. Not eating right, the whole 9 yards.

So I knew what was coming. I knew that when I hit my thirties, my forties and fifties, that I was gonna pay. Because I had already started. I injured my back real badly one job--a tree service job--that I literally could not sit down or stand up without assistance for about a year.

My wife at the time had to--like I was in the chair--people who have had bad backs know what I'm talking about. It wasn't like *oh it hurts*, it was *vomit*, like if you move wrong you'll vomit. And so, what happened, one of my discs in my back, lower back, burst and it was just floating around.

GG: Oh my goodness, I've never even heard of that.

LB: Yeah, she screamed. She touched my back and she started screaming. And so I felt around and it was like a gelatin pack in my back.

The bottom line is that it took me about two years to recover from that. And so I wrote my novel, my first novel while that was going on.

The point is I had this relationship with pain. But, there's another thing that's going on--it's that people overlook the capabilities, needs, wants, desires, of people past a certain age. Heaven forbid that Hollywood shows two people with gray hair getting it on. It's almost like, *Oh, she wants to have sex, how gross, right?* That's literally how they--or, *Well how can this guy be a threat?* or *How can this old woman be a threat?* I'm like *well, Roald Dahl could tell you how, the landlady, she'll put a little arsenic in your tea and we'll see how smart you are.*

Like I said, once again it's not a new thing, it's not nascent to me, I just said, *Let's make old people relevant.*

GG: Yes, yes.

LB: Because nobody was really doing it at the time. I mean, I'm not saying *nobody* was doing, but it just wasn't very popular. Not only did I want to make--I didn't want to fall into the trap of *Well, all old people are evil.* I wanted old people just to be, or people--I shouldn't say *old people*--people that are not traditionally featured and centered in the arts, especially noir and action-oriented... Because I write very action-oriented. *Why can't the old people be screwing? Why can't old people be doing what they do in real life?* They're not all nice, tidy people, but they're also not all a bunch of crackpots. They're people.

And so, I just kind of fell into doing that, and I still do it. And now I'm getting there myself.

GG: Did you see the film *Anything for Jackson?*

LB: No. It's on my list.

GG: It was a complete surprise to me, coming out last year. Totally enjoyed it. The two protagonists are a much older couple dealing with a very difficult situation and they take some extreme measures to pursue their objective. They're both--the characters would be in their mid to late--mid-60s probably. Seeing the relationship between them as they take these extreme measures is really fascinating.

I often think about your characters. The man from--is it YO-ren Falls? or JO-ren Falls?

LB: JO-ren Falls.

GG: Joren Falls. This is a couple who are in their--they're retired now. And there's some sex in it (LB: yeah!) and there's some, you know--dealing with old age. You're representing people across the spectrum of their lives. There's this sense of the encroaching doom, of death, not from horrific means, just aging, just heading toward that end.

One of the things I find the most fascinating. I'm a cat dad. I have three cats, and a couple of outdoor cats. Our *side cats* as my kids call them. That's the thing to call, now, *side cats*. Yeah, I grew up with dogs, but your relationship with dogs clearly is--shows up in your work in a number of ways. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about dogs, and your relationship with dogs. I'd love to hear a little bit about what the Iditarod, running that three times, and training for them, how that shaped your view of dogs, your relationship with dogs. I think the dog characters in your stories, as much of a view as we get of them--Rex being probably the most intimate view we get, as the protagonist--your dogs seem to be a lot more noble than most of your protagonists. I wonder if you have some thoughts on--what is it about dogs that draws you to put them in your stories and include them in your life? Are they better than human beings?

LB: Yeah, well people--well, first of all--I guess I should answer that or else I'll lose it. I actually don't think that they're better

than human beings. I think that they're perfect examples of what they are. Much more so than the typical person. As a good example--in Aristotle's sense of the word, *a hammer is good when it is doing what a hammer is supposed to do and a human being is good if and when a human being is doing what a human being is supposed to be doing*. The question is *what is a human being supposed to be doing?*

And so, my biased opinion is that some human beings are great--whether they're good or bad, they're doing what they're supposed to be doing--but I think a lot of people aren't.

Dogs, though, are almost perfect that way. They literally are perfect at being dogs. Like I said, I have a complicated relationship with them.

Yeah. *sigh* The Iditarod is not something I miss or would ever want to do again. I've been asked this many times, you know *do you miss having sled dogs?* Really the only thing--I don't miss--I'm glad I raced the race--I think once would have been fine. I wouldn't trade any of my experiences in. I might do them differently, but I wouldn't trade them in because they are my--a lot of my identity was forged from doing this. I'm a different writer, a different person, than I would have been. I think I'm probably a better person for all my mistakes and experiences that I had, but I do miss the dogs. I could never go back to that life--I have a much more ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with the idea of how we treat animals than I did when I was growing up. When I was growing, I was raised partially religious but also just practical. Animals are--*there's people and there's animals*, and you try to be fair, but they're second. They get short shrift compared to people. That's how I was raised. It wasn't even a question of arguing that one, that was just how it was pounded into my head.

But as time has gone on, I've come to more look at animals--especially domesticated animals like dogs and cats--that we're their stewards. I look at them like--I'm childless, but I look at it

kind of--I've worked in public education with little kids, with actually kids of all ages--and I realize that there's this complex relationship... it's kind of similar. The responsibilities aren't as great in the societal sense, although I think being in charge of something or someone's life is a pretty awesome responsibility no matter whether it's human or whether it's not. The point is that I started using the word *steward*. I kind of feel like...

GG: It's a great word for it.

LB: Yeah, parents are--they don't own their children, they're their stewards, they're responsible. That's kind of how I look at dogs--that's how I look at animals, that's how I've come to really look at dogs. I don't know. Dogs are--they've kind of been bred and cultivated to sort of be an augment to human endeavour. Dogs are happiest when they are with you doing what you want to do. And I can tell you right now, if it's the right breed and they've been trained properly and fed, and everything's proper, they're happy whether it's pulling a sled, out chasing quail, or sitting on the couch watching tv with you. I mean, all animals and human beings' default state, including marathon runners, is *I'd rather just watch Nascar this weekend rather than go do...* but the bottom line is, I certainly would rather do a lot of other things than write, but writing is certainly my calling.

The bottom line is that dogs have a tendency to--they're happiest when they're with you, as your partner. And whatever degree that you allow them to be your partner. And dogs also like children, human children. They kind of rise to the expectations you put on them. If you don't expect anything from them, you'll get a dog that's sort of indifferent. Although this is where dogs are more perfect, they have a tendency to default to *I love you*, no matter.

But, I had a different relationship with my Athena, my rescue pitbull that I had. I got her actually--we got her about a week before "Old Virginia" came out in 2002, when she was just a baby. My relationship with her changed after I got divorced and

moved from the Pacific Northwest over here to New York State because we did this--she was 7 and a half, almost 8 years old, so I'd had her for all these years, we were really good friends. Our relationship changed when we went for that road trip together. We went and...we stopped in Montana for a few months, about 8 months.

GG: You lived in a cabin, right. It was like, your brother owned a cabin.

LB: Yeah, yeah. It was like Walt Disney, it was up in the mountains. You could drive to it, but only if the road--it was a logging road so if it snowed, you couldn't, if it was raining, you couldn't, the road would get too muddy. On and on. Bears in the backyard. The whole--then we, we stayed there. I wrote most of *The Croning*, I wrote several of my big stories. I wrote "More Dark" while I was sitting in that little cabin.

We're talking about a cabin way smaller than this little bedroom office that I've got. It was literally just this little cubicle. And I was happy with it. I would get up and I would go out and run around with my dog and look at elk and... you name it... red-tailed hawk circling us while we were out walking. And then I'd come in and I'd write and I'd write and I'd write, and I did that for about 18-20 hours a day, as I--I'd go out for walks with my dog, come in and write, and just alternate. But our relat--

Then I wrote *Hand of Glory*, while I was there.

GG: You wrote a poem, I think, about that, called "The Elk", is that right?

LB: Well, it's not *about it* but it's certainly--another version of me, the author is certainly another version of me.

GG: You said "Hand of Glory."

LB: “Hand of Glory.” I wrote it while I was there. That was a busy summer. I wrote several--oh, I also wrote...I wrote one other thing and then I wrote most of the novel, like 95% of the novel. I finished it when--I had to finish the last, like, 50 pages when I got here to New York.

The point is my relationship changed with Athena. It transformed. After--we had never been on a road trip--I had never driven--that was 2300 miles. Terrifying. I didn't know if my truck was going to make it. It was this old beat up truck. And she did not know what to make--we were going through Chicago, middle of the night, and the wind was blowing the truck sideways and it was bumper to bumper traffic. She climbed up on me. I was trying to read a map and go through bumper to bumper traffic. I remember talking to a police officer and he's like, *There's no good time to go through, it'll always be like that* so I said, *Okay*.

We got here and our relationship was never the same. There was something different about our relationship. It was way better. Way deeper.

GG: What was it? A knowing of each other in some way? She understands more about you?

LB: Well, you find out about yourself when you travel. Don't they say that's one of the great things if you ever--before marrying somebody, go travel with them. Or even--go in business. They say that about any kind of relationship. Doesn't have to be a carnal relationship, it can be any. Before you--you know, go do a weeklong trip with someone and see what they're like.

But we bonded more deeply and there was just something really magical about it. I had the same thing with my sled dogs. They were not pets. I loved them, but I had a completely different relationship. It was all or nothing. It was live or die together. You know, I got stomped by a moose once because I wouldn't get out

of the way. I didn't even think about it. It wasn't bravery. It wasn't like, *oh I was--* no, it was *they're my pack, I'm not going to leave. If they get stomped, I get stomped.* We went through the ice one time, and I didn't-- I stayed with 'em and we were very lucky. But it wasn't conscious, it was just like *no, this is your pack.* I felt like after we made that trip, Athena and I were a pack instead of master and pet. We were more partners.

So she started appearing in all my writing. I'd written about dogs before... But also, by the time I started writing about Rex, and the Jessica Mace stories, and Coleridge, Athena was getting much older. The difference between a dog and a kid is a kid grows up and goes to--for most of us, the kid will grow up and go to school, and they bury us. Your dog dies. Your cat dies. That is your reward at the end of 15 years--you lose 'em. And so *rueful sound* Luckily, I'm a writer so I can immortalize her, so I did.

GG: Yes. I think Minerva appears...It references Minerva, right?

LB: Well you've got Minerva/Athena, right? And Achilles, and... Yeah, Minerva appears in many stories. Athena is never--I'm trying to remember if I ever put Athena. I don't think I ever--I think I had her in a story but I took her name out and changed it.

So: complicated relationship. I have a much more ambivalent feeling about animals and sports than I used to when I was a kid. Horse racing. You name it, right? I don't think I could ever become a hypocrite going *no, it's all evil and wrong*, but it's not for me anymore. I'm not interested--I don't have a problem with other people, if they want to race dogs, if they want to go bet in the Kentucky Derby. I kind of acknowledge that that's a thing--that's a cultural... But I'm a point now where I am--I won't denigrate it but I won't participate in it anymore, because I don't feel comfortable anymore.

I don't feel--I don't know. I feel like I could have a dog team if we were just going to go travel. If I had six dogs and they all lived in the house with me, and then we would go out and I'd hook up to

a set of skis or a little light sled and we'd just go travel together. I miss that. I would never--not because it's evil or anything--just because I don't have the interest anymore in making dogs or any other animal--like, I'm really nervous about how we use German Shepherds in crime detection and in warfare and stuff. Because, to me it's not simple--it's not so simple as, *Well, they're dogs, that's what we do* or *They're dolphins, that's what we do*. Well, it is what we do, but maybe there's an argument to be made that it's better--that basically, it's the lesser of two weevils, as Russell Crowe would say, but it's not for me.

And I'm wrestling with that. I think that what I just want out of--what I want out of our dog here, is I just want her to be happy and be a pet. That's her job. Her job is not to defend the house, although she will bark, her job is not to pull a sled or to go hunting with me or anything like that. If she wanted to do those things, great. Her job is to live a life. My job is to be her steward, and I think you see that in the writing.

GG: Her job--to be a dog, to be perfectly a dog--is to be your companion. She doesn't have to pull anything or flush anything out of the bushes or whatever.

LB: Yeah, and our job has to be not to prepare them for life but to be there for them until the end. That's--despite our grief, this is what we do for them. Like Coleridge says *it's the least we can do*.

GG: Let me change gears a little bit. Talking about craft, influences, and form. The evolution of your narrative style over the years. It seemed to me like in *Imago Sequence*, *Occultation*, and *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All*--I think of those as these mostly...the horror classics. The narrative style seems fairly set within those stories, though the story "Occultation" is very--there's something very strange happening there. It seems, not experimental but much more evocative than narrative, I guess.

But then, when I got to reading *Swift to Chase* I was very surprised and very moved by how different the writing style was. I don't know. How would you describe it? As more conversational? More--I don't know--there's just such a shift in the style there. In fact, I kind of come away thinking that it's a more feminine style. It relates more to Jessica and--um, the other, who's the...cheerleader's name again?

LG: Oh, Julie Vellum.

GG: Julie Vellum. They're such key figures, really the lead characters in so many stories in *Swift to Chase*. Can you tell me a little bit about the intention you had in the change of style there? Was it something that was very intentional, or was it just a natural progression of your writing?

LB: It was intentional. I felt--and I'm not saying I won't return to it. I think that would be foolish--but I felt like with those three books, each of the first three collections--prior to *Swift to Chase*--had one or two stories that were outlier-type stories. I used to say that I put them in there to point a little bit toward the next collection--because each collection *was* slightly different.

Swift to Chase--I owe a lot to Jessica. She changed my thinking, being around her. My new scenery, being divorced--my life completely--anybody's who ever been through anything like this, whether it's you're a widower, you're a divorced person--it's a huge change in your life. It's an upheaval. And then of course the traveling--the traveling from one end of the country to another.

I felt like my writing--two things were going on. One, I had pretty much done what I wanted to do with the explicitly Lovecraftian--the way that those stories were generally structured within those collections, and what they deal with and how they deal with it. I kind of felt like, *Alright--I won't say I've played out, but I've done what I wanted to do, maybe even more so than some people would have liked.* And what I learned is that you're damned if you do, damned if you don't. If you keep

writing in a certain way--it's what King and Straub say that *well you're just repeating yourself, I'm bored*. If you change, it's like, *What is wrong with you, I'm never buying another--I'm not buying any more of your books! I can't believe that Swift to Chase and blah blah blah*. You know what? That's fine. I knew this was going to happen. I give credit to her--I give credit to Jessica M., and I also give credit to John Langan, Stephen Graham Jones... I'm a huge Stephen Graham Jones [fan].

GG: Yes. Yeah, me too.

LG: What happened is, I was trying--I had been writing for a long time when I moved here and the third and fourth books came out pretty shortly after I moved over here, like in 2011. I had no safety net at the time, for writing. None. No savings, no nothing. And so, I was renting a room from John Langan and his wife Fiona, with their son David. I had this little room in the back, and that's where I was for about three years. I did as much writing in those three years as I have in my entire career, just about.

GG: Wow.

LB: I remember, John and I would have these late-night sessions. Because we--I had my dog and he had--he got more and more as time went on, but they had like three of theirs. We'd walk our dogs, and we'd walk them 4-5 times a day, constantly. Every three hours we'd take them out. We would walk to the end--he has this really nice suburban country-style neighbourhood. We would walk up this hill and walk back, and we would talk about writing. We talked about everything, but we talked about writing a lot. And John is one of the great writers in the horror/weird fiction field. He's not just *a* writer, he's like one of the greats.

Stephen Graham Jones, I've mentioned him, he's one of the greats. I think Jones might be in the top 2 or 3 that we have

working in America right now, of *all* writers. Him and Kelly Link.

The bottom line is, I said, *You know man, one of the things I've never been able to do is write quickly--and I still can't--What can I do to up the pace a little bit?* We talked about Stephen Graham Jones. Now Stephen Graham Jones has the Harlan Ellison talent, which is he can sit down and type a story in an afternoon, and it's *quality*. That'll never be me. And we're not talking about 3000 words, we're talking about--I think he wrote *The Long Trial of Nolan Dugatti* in like--which is like 30,000 words or something--and he wrote it in like 24 hours or something. That will never be me. That doesn't mean though--just 'cause you can't be Muhammed Ali, doesn't mean you can't move your head when someone punches at you. *Oh, I've got the idea, yeah alright, and you give him a stiff left back, right?*

So I kind of feel like: I can never be Stephen, but I can take some lessons from him. And I'm not going to go into it, but I observed certain things that I perceived that he does with his writing, and I said--I didn't want to sound like that--but it's a mechanical process--I went, *Huh, I have a tendency to over--a lot of my writing has been overwritten over the years*. Way too polished. Spending way too much time on certain things. So I became much looser, and that's where the conversational element--in some ways it's denser. It becomes--there's much more nuance going on in the stories, there's much more--there are things that are going on in the stories than there really were in my first collections.

But, the mechanical nature of the stories: how they get onto the page and you perceive them--how the average reader perceives them--is very informal and very conversational, and in the case of Jessica Mace and Julie Vellum almost stream of consciousness. I don't worry too much about--I've even had editors--just recently I wrote a Jessica Mace story which is a

sequel to “Joren Falls,” she ends up in that house, looking into that.

GG: Oh my gosh.

LB: Yes. Somebody buys that house and she ends up there and there’s something going on. So anyway, they were--I let the corrections stand, but they made some corrections that I looked at and went, *Oh, yeah, it’s the rough way that she--* because Coleridge everything is fairly, even though it’s conversational, it’s pretty polished, generally. It’s polished in its informal nature. Jessica Mace, she’ll use kind of weird--all malapropisms and things like that. And they were, *Oh this is kind of...* and I said, *That’s fine, take it out, whatever* but, the point is it’s very rough, I don’t over-polish anything she thinks because it’s all in her head. I don’t over-polish it. If she wants to be--to have a little soliloquy and it’s kind of rambling, I let her do it. Because it’s not the amount of words that slows you down in a story--it doesn’t take me really much more time to do an 8,000-word than a 3- or 4-. It’s the polish level--the precision.

If I’m speaking from the point of view of Coleridge, and to a much greater degree Jessica Mace, I just let it come out. And then I just polish it to make sure that it’s basically grammatically correct enough to know what’s my voice and what her voice is. That’s way easier to write. I’ve had poems that take me 2 to 3 years to write. The more precise your language, I have found--it’s like trying to work in detail. Working in detail is way harder than slapping paint on the side of a canvas. They both take--if you don’t have talent, and you’re just slapping paint, I mean, there could be an intention here, but it’s easier to paint in broad strokes. And you can use a large amount of paint in a short amount of time, but if you’re trying to paint in detail--you’re going to be sweating, and it’s going to take you forever to do a good job.

By and large, this is kinda what happened with all those stories in *Swift to Chase*. They’re all more narratively--even though I’ve

done it in the past--they're all more kind of loose and free, you know--sort of free-flowing in how they are created.

GG: The experience of reading *Swift to Chase*, it was like going back to high school for me. It just feels like you're sharing stories with friends. You have this group of friends--yeah, very much the experience of being there. I thought the experience of *Swift to Chase* was fascinating, but yeah, it was such a different piece--the whole set of stories were really different from what had come before, and I really, really enjoyed it.

LB: Well, one point I wanted to make was that... I wrote *X's for Eyes* right in the middle of that.

GG: Really?

LB: Something I'm really proud of is that I can switch into--I don't have a mode. I have--I look at it like martial arts. I went to a school where I learned--it was a very small suite of moves, like most martial arts schools, they have like anywhere from 3 to 4,000 moves, something like that. You may not learn them all, but that's like--if you were to break it down. The thing that I studied for years, it was very much a street--it was just pure street self-defense, there was no sport component to it. Like, 800 moves? And what I was taught, was the Bruce Lee *fear not the man who does 10,000 side-kicks, or the man who knows 10,000 techniques, fear the man who does 1 technique 10,000 times* and so, I look at that with my writing. I'm not going to be able to carve out a niche in dozens of different styles, but I can pick more than one or two. So what I have is I have about 4 or 5.

GG: Interesting.

LB: So *X's for Eyes*, anybody who reads *Swift to Chase* and you read *X's for Eyes*--and also I wrote *Blood Standard* around that time too. *Blood Standard* was written in 2013. "Andy Kaufman Creeping Through the Trees" is like 2013-2014. *X's for Eyes* was written in 2015. So I wrote them all--to me, *Blood Standard* and

X's for Eyes are completely different, stylistically. And of course, Julie Vellum and Jessica Mace are completely--you can see it's the same guy writing them, there's no question there, but it's like singing falsetto, tenor--beatboxing. No one else will care about it, for me it was a personal accomplishment to be able to shift from writing *X's for Eyes* and back into writing Jessica Mace.

GG: Oh, absolutely it is. To be able to do that, and to do it competently, and you end up publishing the stuff and it's received and it has its impact. And another is the Nanashi work, *The Man With No Name* and then "We Used Swords in the '70s", right?

LB: 70's. Yep.

GG: (Pulls book from shelf) From this wonderful little tome here, the *Weird Fiction Review* Number 9.

LB: It's beautiful.

GG: Oh, it's so beautifully--the paper even just feels wonderful. It's got a cool cool cover. I did want to ask just a little bit about the influences for those stories. It's like a Japanese Yakuza-type world.

LB: *agreement sound*

GG: To me, it felt like, and I think we had a little twitter exchange about this, but it felt like Japanese cinema was sort of the source for this.

LB: *agreement sound*

GG: Tell me about what inspired that character, that world. What drew you to that?

LB: You know--you're not supposed to necessarily take anything like this away from the story--you're supposed to just read the

story--and of course I wrote them several years apart. I wrote "We Used Swords in the '70s" five or six years--because I wrote *Nanashi*, *Man With No Name*, like in 2012 or something. So there's like a five or six year gap between them.

My thought about the *Man With No Name* is--it wasn't supposed to be some sort of faithful examination of how the Yakuza work. It was supposed to be--in a lot of ways, a kid--because I grew up on this kind of stuff--but basically, a white kid who grew up in America, his relationship with those types of films coming over here. So I wanted to do a horror crime story that owes far more to the fantasy world of the Yakuza than any kind of--because in reality they're pretty boring. Much like the mafia. My mafia--my Italian and Irish mobsters over here, and Russian, are far more--owe to the fantasy-world view of them. Unashamedly. I'm not Joseph Wambaugh, or Puzo, I'm not a true crime guy. I'm trying to write--look these are the movies or some of the books and things that inspired me.

I grew up--like I think we all did--watching the action films. When I was in my twenties, got into Kurosawa. Also, and then more recently, in the '90s I started watching Asian--Korean and Japanese horror and drama--which, sometimes, there's little distinction between those genres. I wanted to write a story that was--how shall I put this--basically an homage to the cinematic version of like, action movies and things like that. That's where I'm coming from with that one.

The sequel is nothing like that. The sequel is basically more of a nightmare--it's kind of a nightmarish... Which I'm still--actually I'm going to use some of that stuff--I'm working on a horror-fantasy novel right now. Some of those characters will be in it. I love the idea of the feud between Kurosawa and Mifune, and doing this fantasy--this sort of fantasy-horror alternate universe thing about what really happened between the two of them.

Because, this had nothing to do with *Man with no Name* although it had a lot to do with the sequel, but John Langan and I--when I moved over--so I lived with him for a while, and now I live about 15 miles away up against the Catskills. We rent the top floor of this big old split-level house. We've got four acres, trees. Out one window: the Catskills. There's a dairy farm. It's pretty *Norman Rockwell*. Up until COVID I would go over to John's house pretty much every week, especially, you know like about 9 months out of the year when it wasn't heavy snow or whatever. And we would watch a movie. Either it would be a TV series like *Fargo*--we watched that together--*Archer*--we watched *Archer* together--or, if those weren't happening, like in summertime, we would go--ok, *let's watch a bunch of Kurosawa--let's watch a bunch of Ingmar Bergman--let's watch--*which, I guess it's something of a non sequitur, but not really, because Kurosawa and Bergman are the same. They both are these--they can be this very austere, kind of *you are the camera, looking at everything*. There's a political and meta element in all their work, you just have to kind of go *huh*. They're entertaining us but they're also making us think.

So, we would watch all this stuff and that really had an effect on me. Although you might not see it in most of my writing, but it certainly affects some of the philosophy espoused by Coleridge and Lionel Robard, for example.

GG: The conversation in "We Used Swords in the '70s", from this *Weird Fiction Review* book, talking about, *Kurosawa has a fake arm*.

LB: Ah! Well, what that came from--so, one of the things that John and I did, I just treasure--we watched two documentaries. One was about--I always get his name wrong-- John Milius, the screenwriter for *Apocalypse Now*--1983 and how he was so--I went and told somebody this I said *I want to be--I'll never be as successful, but aesthetically, I want to be the John Milius of writers. I can write "The Lagerstätte", which is a literary story, or something weird like "--30--" that over here I can give you,*

no here's a plain--a chase--these loggers are getting chased through the woods by Cthulhoid monsters. I want to be able to do both. I want to be able to write a pulp story. And that's what John Milius did. He did *Red Dawn* for goodness' sake, but he also did *Apocalypse Now*. I love him more for the fact that he'd go, *Or we could be going down in the dirt, we could roll around in the mud, and glory in our pulp, in our low--how low can my brow go? Oh, you want me to lift it up and do something 'elevated'? Fine, it's your money--you're paying me.* So we watched that together and it was just--it was fascinating.

But the one that got me, and the one that led to that story that we've been discussing, is--it was about the relationship between Kurosawa and Mifune, and how they were in a sort of symbiotic relationship, and then they had a falling out, and were pretty much--I don't know that they really, I mean they kind of reconciled, but not really. The whole conversation about *what really happened is*, you know, *and their feud took a violent turn, and then a creepy turn...*I'm going to do more with that.

GG: I love that element. And that to me seemed like such a--like something that I would actually see in a Japanese movie. That kind of dialogue, that moment where these guys, they can be shooting each other, shooting other people, now they're talking about, *Oh yeah, he's got a fake arm, you know.* These two greats of their culture, Kurosawa and Mifune, they were butting heads. Sounds like something Tarantino would have written years later.

LB: Yep! Oh sure. Absolutely.

GG: More than anything, out of the *Man with no Name*, is looking at this Muzaki character. This retired wrestler, and how adored he is, because he was a world-famous pro-wrestler.

LB: He's based on a real person.

GG: Really?

LB: Yeah. Several, but there was a--I don't want to go too far into it. Basically, when I was doing my research, there was a professional wrestler, I want to say in the '50s, who had dual citizenship. But he eventually--he was this huge wrestler in Japan. Their wrestling--I don't know 100%--it was still kayfabe to the hilt, but still, I think there was a little bit more reality to some of it. I said *oh, I can just*--and I believe this guy, if I recall, one of the versions of the guy that I'm writing about, like in real life, one of the composite, they were shot. They were basically--they were essentially adopted as a mascot by one syndicate and a rival one I think shot him in a nightclub. So I just--it doesn't line up 100% at all--but it's taken from stuff that did happen in history. I was like, *Well of course, it just makes sense, why wouldn't they?* Over here, the mafia has its pet boxers, right? There's rumors and rumors. There's football players, you know. There's mafia guys sitting in the sky boxes for the Dallas Cowboys or whatever. So the bottom line is, even if it hadn't been--that was just something that I would have probably come up with because it just makes too much sense.

GG: It takes on this Telemachus and Odysseus sort of relationship as he's looking at this figure that's been part of their history. He's this famous wrestler and he takes on these kinds of dimensions, like *Muzaki could take on a whole contingent of Yakuza thugs* and do pretty well against them. It takes on almost a Greek epic scale or Greek tragic scale.

LB: Right. Because he--I think someone says *Time is a ring* and he goes, *No, it's a maze. It's a maze of knives*. That was his conception of time. That you're basically trapped in it, you're trying to--and of course, what else is in a maze? A minotaur. Essentially, there is a Greek element there.

My thing is that I love to mix--especially when we're talking about, you know, action films--basically fantasy. I love Japanese fantasy. I love their--all these--there are so many Samurai films, and they're simply our Westerns. Or our Westerns are simply Samurai films, right? But they go back and forth--and of course

the Italians are doing their thing. But the bottom line is that we all share this, we just have different--we use different clothing. We clothe it differently. It all boils down to the same thing. That's why these stories are so--that's why Star Wars was able to use--Lucas was able to use *The Hidden Fortress* so easily. Good stories are good irrespective of their trappings. They're simply great stories. That's why Shakespeare is so easy to adapt. Hamlet works on a desolate space station or a station in decaying orbit as well as it does, you know, in a castle, right? Because it's the story. Homer's *Iliad* and *the Odyssey* work no matter the time period. That's been done as a crime--a guy getting out of prison and coming home to find out--he's been in prison for 20 years and he comes out and he's dealing with all the traitors or whatever. It transcends the trappings and so when I was writing this--this doesn't transcend in that way. It's simply saying *we all*--I'm talking to the people who enjoy these types of films and books and comics and things and the people who enjoy them enough to make them. That's who. It wasn't really even so much--I wasn't really thinking about the average reader. I figured the average reader--you know--either they'll like it or they won't like it. This was a love letter to a certain type of reader.

GG: You've mentioned on twitter Takashi Miike.

LB: Oh yes.

GG: And how you in particular, you were saying *you've gotta understand--you need to see this and understand how much he cares about his characters*. His stuff is bizarre and gruesome and grotesque. Do you feel like his work--his films have had any influence on your stories?

LB: Absolutely. I would say that in general, Asian cinema has had a disproportionate influence not on what I write about, or even--I don't think--if I were ever to talk about this outside of *Man with no Name* I don't think it's all that obvious--maybe Coleridge a little--but it informs so much of what I've done. Part

of the way it informs it is little things you might not think of, but the absurdity--Japanese cinema--even other foreign cinema like Ingmar Bergman stuff--just absolutely, stick-in-the-tundra-seriousness--and yet they'll do something like--Bergman used to break the fourth wall all the time. And it will mock you for basically buying into the meta-narrative. In other words he'll be like, *Oh you believed everything you watched, huh?* Why do you believe it, well because you're conditioned, we're all conditioned to get certain things out of certain narratives. We're trained to do this. TV trains us. Comics. Books train us how to consume them. The bottom line is, what I got out Asian cinema is that it'll be just this dead serious narrative and then some kind of slapstick thing will happen. They treated it all with the same meticulous care. They didn't say, *Well, this is just a jokey thing we put in.* Maybe someone thought that, but they didn't treat it that way. That's not what I got out of it: *no this is equally important.* This pie in the face moment, or this digression, is just as important as the plot on rails. The thing is, most fiction--most popular--you know, if you want to sell it, and if you want to be invited to sell more--there has to be a beginning, a middle, and an end. It can be weird but there has to be a recognizable arc. The Japanese are like--the Koreans are like, *Maybe... Maybe we can do your arc... or maybe we won't! Or maybe we'll do something--we'll go off the beaten path and come back to it at the last--we'll swerve back onto the road at the last second.*

They also show vulnerability. See this is something that we do not get in Westerns. Part of it is cultural. Part of it is the filter. I don't speak Japanese, so I'm sure I'm missing some nuances. In Western literature and cinema, unless it's self-consciously artistic, it has a tendency to be very--everything is programmatic. *This is your redemption moment. This is where the guy decides not to be a jerk anymore and he's gonna start--you know, Michael Fox has been trapped in this town long enough being a jerk from the city, he's going to understand that everybody deserves human kindness, and maybe he'll save himself. And here's the first scene where that happens.*

GG: Is that the one with the pig? He's out in the country with the pig?

LB: Yeah, he crashes and the judge says, *You need to do community service...*

GG: That's it, yes.

LB: Right. But there's always--and I'm not knocking Hollywood. You see it in novels too. There's a definable moment where--*okay, here's where the montage: a kid spits up in his face probably, or somebody has a dirty diaper.* You know, *the human moments!* We're going to give--to curse here--like in *Team America: the motherfucking montage, here we go.*

The Japanese do their share of it, but their films that are less Hollywood-emulating have a tendency to show vulnerable moments that really are vulnerable. And by that I mean--if an action hero like Jason Statham--may be holding a kid, like this, like dirty diaper--like Arnold Schwarzeneger--but it's played as a laugh.

GG: It is always played as a laugh, yeah.

LB: He will never have his pants unzipped and his dong hanging out accidentally like, *Oh my god, I've got to put it away* or he'll never cry, unless his dog dies. He'll never show any genuine emotion. He'll never say something stupid to his girlfriend, and then it doesn't get resolved. *You just said something stupid, and she's mad at you.* In Western cinema, everything has a purpose. There's nothing the camera lingers on that doesn't--Checkov's Gun is everywhere. In Asian cinema, you don't always know where Checkov's Gun is, and there could be Checkov's lapel, there could be Checkov's cufflinks lying there. And he's putting them on and you're like, *Ok this is going somewhere.* No! We're just showing you that this guy likes this. People are allowed to have--it's still stylized: it's cinema--but there's moments where they're human. There's moments where the hero is cowardly.

Like they have no problem with the hero running out of bullets and running behind something. Not like, doing an action slide. No, he's like *see ya!* And he runs off.

I picked up on that and went, *Oh, you can do that, you can do that.*

GG: My experience with Asian cinema started with a cartoon called *Battle of the Planets*. It was *Ninja Science Team Gatchaman* or *G-Force*, sometimes it's called over here. I didn't know it was made in Japan and then dubbed over into English and brought over but there was something about that series where I could see, *Hey, wait a second, there's like character arcs going on between episodes. These two are friends here but there's a little something more in the next episode.* I just knew that something was going on there, and it wasn't like *G.I. Joe* or *Transformers* where any episode can go in any order, it doesn't matter, it's purely commercial. The Japanese were doing something very different. Of course anime is a huge thing in America now, because I think their approach to storytelling is so different and cohesive.

LB: And I'm not a--I don't privilege one thing over the other, I like to synthesize them. But one other thing, before I get off this. One other thing that's changed about my writing because of that influence. They're not afraid to leave you hanging. I don't mean like, *Did the killer kill them? We don't really know...* but like, it's an either or. No, they'll have endings to their stuff where you have to--you watch this whole movie, it's fairly linear, then the last 15 minutes you have to rewatch 5 times to go, *Wait a minute, what happened?* Because it will take a 90 degree turn. It's not something that I want to see every day, it's certainly not something I want to consistently write, but it taught me that, *Oh you didn't like the ending, huh? You didn't get it? That's fine.* There's an ending, and it doesn't always have to be explained to you. I really like that.

GG: Some of your stories--again, *experimental* is not really the word for it, I don't think--but some of your stories you're working so carefully with the narrator or the protagonist's state of consciousness--and it's not necessarily linear or there's like two different levels of consciousness happening side by side... and it really is--where it's challenging to understand what's going on in terms of the plot. It is about the experience of someone's consciousness not operating the way normal human consciousness operates. That to me is just fascinating. I would think that's enormously challenging to create something that evokes that sort of altered state of mind.

LB: First of all, I have to give credit to Brian Evenson, who--I don't know if you've ever read Brian, but--genius--a genius writer. I don't say it lightly, but he's a genius writer. Stephen Graham Jones, Jeff Ford, John Langan, Kelly Link. I could go on. There are a few geniuses. These are genius writers. Kelly Link can do that, will do that, where--not necessarily specifically about altered consciousness but--you have to go back and look at--they'll do tricks with the writing where you'll go *wait a minute* the concept is--Stephen Graham Jones is the big one. He actually has several stories where you must go back and read them again to know, *Did that just happen? No, that didn't happen the way I thought it did. I have to go back and read the whole story again because the key to it is way back here.* He is also quite capable of giving you a plain old, three-act structure--or seven-act--oftentime it's a seven-act structure.

The point is that--yeah--I don't think it's challenging to come up with the head space, because either you can do it or--in other words, it's like saying *is it hard being 5'10"*? No. If you think a certain way, you think a certain way. What's difficult is communicating it in any way that satisfies requirements to be somewhat commercial. Because I've written a few stories--that's what I like about short fiction--where I don't give a--I actually love it when people hate it in an anthology. I get just as much pleasure if not more vindictive pleasure about getting angry

about one of my stories in an anthology, than I do them liking it. I'll take either. You know, indifference is our only enemy.

When it comes to novellas, you know, standalone stuff--it can be weird, but I figure it's a bigger time investment for readers. I'm not really respectful of, *I wasted 15 minutes reading that story and I got hosed*, like *Ah, you'll get over it*. But, *I spent \$25 and I don't understand this book and I spent all weekend*, I have some empathy for that, some sympathy. I've never set out to try to do anything to people. So, if it's a bigger piece of work I have to tendency to play more--not a 100%, but a little more by the rules. In short fiction I feel like *freak flag time*.

GG: If you're not going to try something different in short fiction, you know. There's lots of people who are going to write ordinary.

LB: The problem is, is that--the game changes after you write--you publish enough. Because, I no longer am judged by this story or that story. No, people start going, *Yeah, but that story reminds me of that one or that one and in that one you said or I don't like this new stuff or I love--I hated the old stuff but the new stuff's great*. They're judging--you're getting--and of course I judge myself by what I've done. I'm like, *You know, I've written this story before. Do I rewrite it or do I write it in a different way or do I just walk away from it?* And so, one of the things that you run into when you sell a bunch of stories...I've sold, you know, I have sold four books of stories, and I've finished about roughly two more books, so I have about six books. You have to be really careful because you only have so many times--because each of these stories is like a little micro-universe--I find it harder to write than a novel--a novel's longer but a novel has beginning, a middle, and an end. The collection has anywhere from 9 to 20 beginnings, middles, and ends. Right? That becomes laborious. Repeating yourself becomes a problem. How many stories can you end on a cliffhanger? How many stories can you end with a good guy--and

so that all comes into play. I don't want to tell the same stories the same way over and over and over again, so...

I won't say that I ever wrote something experimental, but I certainly stretched myself. I have written a few things that at first I wasn't comfortable writing. And that I had to--I really had to work outside my comfort range to sell them and to get any kind of positive--for the story space to satisfy any kind of requirement of being in a commercial--because you know pretty much everything I write is in some sort of commercial venue. It can be weird, but you've got to give them something to hang their hat on. I think I usually do that. There's usually something in it where, you may have disliked a bunch of things but *ah, there was an action scene!* Right?

GG: Absolutely. Is there a particular story that comes to mind as having gotten significantly more negative feedback than the others?

LB: Only--negative? Actually, I have only had one or two stories that have gotten consistently negative... I got plenty of stories like *this is crap!* But one or two stories that have generated raw emotions in people. One was a very straightforward story, actually one of my most straightforward stories was "Catch Hell". About the couple who had lost a child--and it's a--

GG: What was it about that that bothered people? I mean the end, it's certainly a gruesome, grotesque ending. It's got occult elements but that's not unusual for your work.

LB: Yeah, and it very much intentionally plays by the rules of the Judeo-Christian axis. Right? In other words, transgressions have occurred, no one who participates is innocent, except one of the couple is less evil than the other, and they're punished. They're explicitly punished for it. That's all intentional. That's one of the only stories I've ever written where--I'm still kind of winking and nodding in that one--but it's written--it could have been written in the '80s at the height of the Satanic Panic. It could have

been--any number of paperback authors could have written that story. The only thing I think sets it apart from that is that it's a literary story. I pay a lot more attention to character development and language. I'm proud of the writing in it. But--it was my--I play around with different things. I play around with pulp from the '50s in *X's for Eyes* and I was playing around with the good-versus-evil and you're going to get punished for doing something kinda genre. But what made people mad is the submissiveness of the woman protagonist--the lead character. Her husband is sort of abusive to her--but in a very realistic way. It's not--this is where it's a departure--from the '80s. In the '80s he would have been slapping her and--you know--tying her up--doing just, you know, over the top. Instead it was more just like, rough sex, and just sort of dismissing--

GG: Yeah, dismissive and demeaning...

LB: Yeah, like when they had sex, it was definitively, you know, he didn't hurt her or anything but she--she might not have even been there, it could have been a prostitute or something. And people got really angry about that, even though I think it's pretty explicit why she permits it. You find out toward the--I'll just spoil it for people--you find out, although I don't come out and say it, but it's right there in the text--essentially she's permitting this--she thinks *I deserve this*--it's her hair shirt. She's putting up with his bullshit because she thinks, and this is based on a real case, this really happened, she dropped her baby off a bridge. And the question is, did she do it intentionally or not? This happened in--I believe in Canada--a woman was standing over a--she had postpartum depression they believe--and the kid fell 70 feet or whatever. But her lawyer was like *she didn't mean to, the baby slipped, how are you going to prove that*--she didn't throw it, she just like--it fell out of her hands. And so I took it a step further: the woman's not even sure. You know how it is in--*did I do that on purpose? Did I*--that really upset people.

All of that upset--so I've been praised for my women, my female characters but that's one where--actually women like that story.

Like, *Oh, I've thought about throwing my kids off the bridge!* It was more just a--it really made people--despite what people say about it, my feeling over time really has less to do with what they're saying about it and what they're feeling. And what they're feeling is that I was very successfully indicting people with that story. Because a lot of people--I think there are a lot of parents who have not necessarily seriously entertained doing something similar, but it went through their head. And people are trapped in their guilt of--would never want to admit to themselves that, *You know, I thought about when my kid slipped under the bath--the water one time, how life would be so much...oh! I can't even--*

GG: Yes, *I can't even think about it.* But fantasizing about being free of the responsibility--the enormous burden, in so many different ways of a spouse, of children, of parents, I guess, as well.

LB: But that one, absolutely I've gotten the most volatile, angry, venomous comments about it. You know what, it means it worked. But they could also be right. I could have done a terrible job representing a woman going through what she was going through. I don't know. I do know that at least part of it though is that it made people really uncomfortable that a mother--there's this sacred--this idea that motherhood's sacred like, in other words, it's like it indemnifies people against being horrible people, or having horrible moments and lapses. When we have a whole history chock-a-block full of people driving their kids into lakes, throwing them off bridges...right? I don't need to--the bottom line is we're fallible.

The story wasn't--I think the other possibility is--sometimes when you write convincingly--and it doesn't matter whether its--because I've written about gay people--

GG: *Mysterium Tremendum.*

LB: But I've also had gay people be the villain--villainous--but the bottom line is, you always run the risk of incurring the wrath, righteously or not, when you portray people--not accurately but convincingly as being bad. Because--and it's possible that I'm guilty of this, but they have a tendency to go *you're making a statement about--like in that story--women. Like this is how women are. Or this is how gay people are. This is how--you know, anybody, right?--this is how loggers are.* When really what I'm just saying is *this is how this person is. This is what this person did.* The bottom line is, I wouldn't want to be indemnified from criticism for writing. I just, you know, don't tell me what I can or can't write. You have no right. And, you know, that's it. I'll take the lumps if you don't like it for whatever reason.

GG: Right. And it's not even that you failed in an attempt, you may have succeeded marvelously and they don't like what you did, or it bothers them tremendously.

LB: I'm completely open to the idea that I messed up. My point is that I have my ideas about what's going on. I don't know. The point is really the only sin anyone can ever commit against an artist is to be unfair. Unfair in the sense of trying to bully them into not doing--essentially book-burning kind of a stuff. Criticism doesn't fall under that. If you write something and you get it wrong or people think that you get it wrong, it doesn't matter, right? You get to hear. I've never taken it personally, even when it gets personal. I try to only take things personally when they're explicitly personal: *You are a jerk.* Not, *That story was terrible.* You may be right. Or *you don't know how to x, y, or z.* You may be right. I mean, that's true. Writing is hard. This is a thing I think Somerset Maughan--no it was Ambrose Bierce--one of those guys said that, *Writing is one of those--it's a thing that--an occupation that's much harder for writers than it is for people who don't write.* *laughs*

GG: I want to ask about one more story and then I've got some questions from folks out on Reddit and Twitter to ask you, and

then we'll wrap up. The story "More Dark". I learned about this because Paul Tremblay put it on his list of the five best horror short stories that you can read for free online, on shortlist.com. I get *now* that it is strongly satirical. When I first read it, I didn't know that, I just took it at face value. I didn't know that it was referring to--you know, sneakily referring to people who are real people in the horror writing industry. And I found it, not knowing that it was somewhat satirical, I found it just unnerving, horrifically grim, and really kind of a transformative story in my time as a reader. And I look at it now and I think it's pretty funny as a work of satire, and at the same time it's just disturbingly bleak. And that you could pull off both of those in the same story is just fascinating. I'll say that in particular, listening to Ray Porter narrate this story in the audiobook version of *The Beautiful Thing that Awaits us All* and hearing him say that line--Mandibole's refrain "something worse" with a guttural sound--"something worse"--it is almost too much to take. Tell me why you wrote this story, and what it means to you now in hindsight, I guess 8 years after it was published?

LB: Thank you, I appreciate it. Ray Porter oh *appreciation sound* he's so good.

GG: Unbelievable. It's a performance. I'm going back and listening to *Imago Sequence* now. I don't know anyone who does a performance of the short stories like he's an actor on stage. It's unbelievable.

LB: No, and he expressed to me that he really genuinely--cause they don't always work--I picked him. I was able to pick him and William DeMerritt, who voices Coleridge, from a small group, but I listened and they were these great voices--and I was really lucky most of the time. Give him his due. I guess he really did enjoy those stories. He told me that he really--he would have done a great job anyway. He and DeMerritt both. DeMerritt really likes Coleridge and Ray liked the horror stories. I think he's a horror guy. I mean he's voicing Darkseid. I'm so happy for him--and he deserves it.

GG: He plays a number of characters in Dirk Maggs's Sandman audio from the Neil Gaiman comics. He's just kind of a Swiss Army Knife character. He plays a lot of different voices. I like him playing in that dark fantasy/horror world.

LB: Yeah, he's--like was made--like that guy was out there waiting--in other words, if there was someone who was going to give voice to these characters, that was the guy. The stories were written for him, would have been a better way to put it. *I wrote these parts for you, my friend!* (*laughs*)

GG: You've never met him have you?

LB: No, we've just talked a little bit online. Super sweet, and like I said, really good. I'm really lucky.

But...I can't go into all of that in that story. There's a lot of personal stuff in that story, but... I felt--I had never written one of these before, and I sort of just said, *A lot of people do 'em--it's like a rite of passage.* Every author at some point writes about his fellow authors.

GG: The Jack Haringa book, I guess would fall into that category.

LB: I'm sure all the greats have done it. I'm sure Hemingway had some sly references to whatever. I mean you know like poets do it all the time, they write poems for each other and stuff. Pound--was it... Pound and Elliot, who wrote back and forth. Enemies, friends, whatever.

So, one thing, I don't like most of them. In genre I don't like most of them. Wagner did one, that I think was talking about his contemporaries. I can't even remember what it's called, but it's basically--they're contemporaries, at one of them has bestseller success--it's about vampirism--one of them becomes more successful, wastes away because essentially the audience is a

vampire. Fame bleeds him dry. You know from the way--I know from the way he spoke about it that story was about him and somebody else, or two other authors he knows. And I loved it because it worked--it didn't matter that there was this meta-narrative. You could not--you could be completely ignorant of that and just enjoy the story about how fame is a vampire. So I said *when I write one of these it has to be*--it's a little more on-the-nose and in-your-face than his, because I decided to go overboard with it--but I want it to work as a horror story, also. So people feel like it does, so that's good.

GG: I--absolutely. I mean it really was--it's just terrifying what--the internal state of the narrator as he's getting more and more inebriated.

LB: Yeah. *drawn out in agreement*

GG: There's something happening there. I'm completely convinced by what he's experiencing so him just stepping outside of the Kremlin bar, and there's kids waiting in line for a jazz show, and I'm afraid someone's gonna--you know--take their stiletto heel off and stab him through the head. I'm just--I feel the inebriation. It's very, very tense the whole way through. And then L's friends, his little entourage--it's like some weird stuff's going on that I didn't really--I just knew that I didn't get everything that was going on and I was scared for the narrator.

LB: Almost all of it is based on stuff that's happened, as you--you know I wrote that right after my divorce, I was not in a very good place. But--what I've noticed is my frame of mind has nothing--nothing to do substantially with how it's going to come out. In other words, I can write pretty much--it may be different, like it'll be well--as well as I'm capable of writing whether I'm upset or not doing it. I've never noticed, like, my feelings about a story having much to do with how the story comes out.

GG: Interesting.

LB: Except sometimes I'm right about how it will be received. Sometimes I'm like, *Oh, this is going to do well, I know this will do well.* But, no, uh I was going through some times, but there's multiple things going on there. I admire Thomas Ligotti and I'm not a big--but I'm not a big fan of how a lot of people, and I don't lay this on him--I'm not laying it on anyone specifically--but I've heard, *Well his mental depression is like a superpower* and I'm like, *Fuck that.* I have mental depression. I do not--let's not go there. Let's not valorize mental illness. And I'm not talking about his viewpoint on antinatalism, which I think can be argued as the product of mental--I mean almost everybody who's antinatalist *I'm dying of a brain tumour--later--was it Schopenhauer, later in life is there suffering, Ah I wish I was never born.* Well, of course, you're suffering. We all cry for our mamas, whether they're alive or dead, when we're in pain. The bottom line is that I'm not really talking about it. I'm talking about--these people valorize mental illness, like, *Well maybe that's what's so great about his writing.* I'm like *no, no.* He's a great writer because he's a great writer.

But even if that's the case, let's not--I wouldn't wish--what--he goes through a different thing, but I wouldn't wish mental depression on anybody for the sake of their art. I think it's a very dangerous--I think when people associate art--the mythology that, *Well if you suffer, that's how you do it.* Or, you know, *If you're a murdering piece of crap, that means you can be a great writer.* Let's not do that. Even if all these things--a lived life, if you have the talent, you'll have plenty to write about. There are plenty of people who have never been to war, are not murderers, don't have mental depression, at least not to any clinical degree, who write beautiful, wonderful, valuable, fiction.

When I was growing up, it was, *Well you gotta be a druggie/alcoholic to really be a real serious artist* and I think that's all damaging. I think that's the wrong message for kids. I think it's one thing--looking at Twitter about how much people project-- practice rejeptomancy like, *Was it something I wore today, is that why I got rejected?* I think about how many

QAnoners are popping up that are otherwise rational people, allegedly. I think the human brain is susceptible to basically bad programming. Bad code. Let's not feed it bad code. The bad code is not *admiring Ligotti*. It's not even Ligotti saying, *Well, maybe we'd be better off if we weren't born*. It's valorizing, *If you're sick, somehow that's going to make you a superhero*. I don't like that. It's not to say that you're not equal, or that there's nothing wonderful about trying to overcome adversity. It's--I don't like the idea though that *you have to be this thing and that's why you are*--because to me that's the same thing as dismissing people for having a disability: *Well, you can't be trusted because you have mental depression*. It's really no different than, *Well, you're particularly suited to some activity because you've got mental depression*. They're just the antipodes of a really unsavory line of thinking, as far as I'm concerned.

So that was part of my motivation. It wasn't: slap at Ligotti. Although, initially it was more so because that's easier to write. It's easier to make it--no, it was a slap at the people who kind of formed the cult of Ligotti. And I don't mean fans, I mean the cult of Ligotti like, *He knows the secrets*. I'm like *no, he's a dude, and he works in Florida at the Gale--you know--textbook company and he has some ideas for stuff*. We're all people, we're not gurus.

The other thing that happened though is maybe more impor--so that was part of it, the other thing that was going on...

GG: Wallace Stevens sold insurance.

LB: Right. It's the bottom line. The other thing that was going on, and I'm not going to go too far into this...

GG: Please, yes, of course.

LB: But I feel like I have to be honest. It was also--one aspect of the story was to take a shot at a writer who had bullied another writer. The guy bullied a lady who was an up-and-coming writer

at the time, and I'm not going to go far into it because everybody's got their side. I perceived it as bullying, and he did it in print. He basically killed off--she had lost a family member, and he immediately put that family member in a story--to be gruesomely in a story. And then, of course, when everybody who knew about it went *hey, uncool... Ah, pip pip, I would never do such a thing* (*vaguely british voice*) *it was a coincidence*. And I was like *well let's see how you like it*. So I basically put the boots to the guy in the story and everybody--it's one of the deals where if you don't know: no harm, nobody knows. It's only for the people who knew. And he did not like it. He was very upset. To this day, he wants to find me, from what I've heard. And I laugh. I'm cackling to this day. It's petty but you know, when I was a kid I had a glass eye and I got into a lot of fistfights, I got pushed around. I have a little special sore spot under my saddle blanket for people I perceive as being bullies. And I felt like writing about someone's dead sibling, who's just passed away, and putting them in a story, and also killing the author in the story too if I recall, it was like a double murder, and naming the same, or almost identical name...

GG: Oh!

LB: Yeah. I felt like that...well, what are you going to do, right? Is there anything more poetic than doing something to them in a story (*laugh*). So yeah, so there you go. And what happened was it got published and there it sat for 2-3 years and nobody said anything. And then the Ligotti board--somebody at the Ligotti board went, *hey! Wait a minute! I think that he's saying--wait a minute! All these people...* and they figured it out and then once you knew--it was like the decoder ring, once you knew it was like *oh*. And they were--I was amazed at how accurate--because I only used initials for a lot of them. Everybody knew who--including people I'd never met--they were like *that's so-and-so-and-the-other--yes, yes it was--well, maybe*. Names have been changed to protect the guilty.

GG: Only barely though. Ok, from the mailbag. I posted on Reddit and Twitter that I was going to interview you and asked if anyone had questions. Mensch01 says, *I'm interested in the new Isaiah Coleridge and the new short story collection focusing on fantasy--do you just want to say real quick the items that you're working on that you haven't already mentioned.*

LB: There's not anytime soon going to be another Coleridge novel, because they're not going on with that. There will be a Coleridge novella! The fantasy collection is probably 2-3 years away but I'm working on it. There will be a new collection--I could send it in now. But basically I'll send it to my agent, probably late this year and then we'll figure it out. The other thing I'm working on--the main thing I'm working on is a fantasy-horror novel set in that universe.

GG: Yes, yes. The Coleridge novella--do you have any idea where--I mean, are you targeting that for a collection, a chapbook?

LB: Yes, it's going to be an original story in a collection.

GG: Very good, very good. Jayfishsf says, *Does Laird plan anymore straightforward noir without any supernatural elements?*

LB: Yeah. But I don't know how that's going to work out. In 20 seconds or less: I want to do a horror collection that the horror is naturalistic. It could be inexplicable, but it's like *people go missing*, or *there's a sighting*--in other words there's not like an overt supernatural element, it's stuff that--like it would be like *Unsolved Mysteries* type of stories. Plane crashes. People trapped in the wilderness. That kind of thing.

GG: Yep. I was re-reading "In a Cavern, in a Canyon" and there's nothing supernatural, as far as we can tell, but it's something unnatural from human perspective.

LB: Right.

GG: Less straightforward than that, would you say?

LB: Oh yeah, it would be far less straightforward and it would--and some of the stories would obviously deal with, if not mafia crime, it would definitely be the crime that I encountered in Alaska, which was local business owners and stuff who were essentially little mobsters of their fiefdoms.

GG: Yes yes. GrimwoodCT asks, *Does Laird shoot darts? If so, Cricket, XO1, or American darts? For some reason, I thought he'd alluded to playing darts in an interview but I can't find it.*

LB: That's bizarre, because I don't think that I did, but... when I was a kid, everybody had a dartboard and we played darts in the house all the time. I assume it was just American darts. It was like, the same thing they're playing in bars all over the place. We just had a dartboard, and the rings and that was--we played Parcheesi, Monopoly and darts. But, as an adult, no. The only thing I played as an adult at bars would be pool or shuffleboard.

GG: Yep. I have no context for the dart question, but GrimwoodCT would know. GrimwoodCT also asks *is the Broadsword an homage to any particular hotel?*

LB: No... but it's set in a neighborhood of Olympia that I used to walk past all the time that I wondered if it had been a hotel that had been converted. So, yes and no. It's the place that I imagined should have been there.

GG: Nice. Jay Johnson asks--Jay Johnson, also a writer asks, *Do you find it challenging to balance artistic exploration with the craftsmanship of good storytelling? Does experimenting with narrative happen at the expense of readability?* I think we actually talked about that quite a lot.

LB: I think we spent an hour talking about that. It can. You know it's all in the eye of the beholder. I lament over stuff all the time. Other people have variable opinions. Overall, the reception for *Swift to Chase* was really good. It didn't do quite as well as it might have just because there wasn't as--the publisher was much smaller, and it came out in a softcover, and blah blah blah... But, my fans--and also there's the fans who wanted more Lovecraftian--but overall I'm very proud of it and overall the reception has been *yeah, this is a good book*. It just didn't--it still--it's in print, I'm getting royalties on it. All my stuff's in print. Yeah, Jay, it can--it's always a risk. But I think--obviously you have to weigh staying alive and eating vs pursuing your art. But, I'm primarily a writer to be a writer. I only want to make money--the only reason I care about making money writing is so that I can do more writing. If someone gave me a million dollars tomorrow and said *that's it, you don't ever have to sell another story, you can do whatever you want*, I would do whatever I want. There would be a few things I would experiment with that I haven't done because I'm like--I keep putting it off. Not because I'm too scared to do it, but like *yeah, I'll get to that thing no one's gonna like after I pay the rent*.

GG: *laugh* Yes, yes.

LB: I think--the last thing about that. One thing I feel comfortable that I've been able to do, especially with the Coleridge novels, because they're so explicitly commercial, is that I look back in shame at them. I don't go, *Ahhh, I did them for the money*. No. I like John D. MacDonald. I like Parker--Robert Parker.

GG: Robert B. Parker, yep.

LB: I like straightforward. There are other types of writing that I like. I love Elmore Leonard, who's a little bit more in the middle. I love all these different writers. And I'm like, *I wrote something*--I compromised. I wrote something I wanted--I wanted to write something commercial, but I wanted to write

something that I would be proud of later. Or at least not go *oh* you know *you basically just did that only money*.

GG: (inaudible) a potboiler, yeah.

LB: Yeah, I wrote three books the way that hopefully future Laird would go *yeah, okay, that was good*. And so that's all I would say about that. I only compromise to the degree that I have to. I feel like I take a risk every time I send a story in, because there's always something in it that someone's going to go *what?* And that was me going, *Ah, you know, it just occurred to me, I wrote that*.

GG: *laughs* Okay, my last question--this is my mailbag question: If a pop artist were dead set on writing a song about you, and it could be positive or negative, which pop artist would you want it to be?

LB: About me, personally?

GG: Yes.

LB: Well... if I had time to think about it, I'd probably come up with something different. Right now, living would be Matthew Good.

GG: Yes, yes.

LB: The Canadian sing--uh, he was in the Matthew Good Band. I think I'd be nervous, because he's kind of acerbic. I--my follow up would be--well no, yeah, I'll just stick with that. Matthew Good.

GG: Any other? What would the follow up have been?

LB: Oh, it's gonna sound kind of funny, but somebody like Eminem.

GG: Really?

LB: Yeah, I'd be curious to see what old Eminem--there's a lot more depth to Eminem than... you know--but Matthew Good would be the one that I'd be most interested in.

GG: Very good. Very good. This has been terrific. Thank you for spending so much time with me--we'll put this up online and when I have some time I'll probably transcribe some of it as well for Reddit's purposes. So yeah, yeah. Thank you so much and we are excited to see more fiction coming down the pipeline in the near future and best wishes for the rest of 2021.

LB: Thank you, it's gotta be better than 2020.

GG: Absolutely.

LB: I appreciate being on and also thanks to the mailbag writers who sent stuff in for the mailbag. I appreciate that.

GG: Cool.