



ICON IV

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Haldeman talks at Ia. SF Convention

By JUDITH GREEN
Staff Writer

Joe Haldeman, who received his M.F.A. from the UI in 1975, was the first science fiction writer admitted to the Writers Workshop and "probably the last too," he said with a grin. He discussed his UI residency (appreciatively) and related topics in an interview before ICon IV, the 1979 Iowa SF Convention, got underway at Coralville's Coachman Inn this past weekend.

Haldeman said that getting into the workshop plus a teaching assistantship in rhetoric and core literature (he taught a course in fantasy and sf) was "important to us personally because it made the transition possible to full-time writing." In 1970, four years before he came to the UI, Haldeman had decided to concentrate on his writing, while his wife Gay supported them by teaching high school Spanish. At the UI she earned an M.A. in linguistics while he wrote.

"I learned a lot from the workshop," he said. "— the Forms of Fiction class" (he smiled, having read a chapter the previous evening of his forthcoming novel *Worlds* that satirized the class, as well as its teacher, Vance Bourjaily, who accepted the fun poked at him with a smiling shrug). "all the readings, the visiting firemen — actually you get more life hints than writing hints from them — and the writers-in-residence. Mostly, though, I liked the lovely companionship of all those people who are doing what you are."

The *Forever War*, Haldeman's first sf novel (he had previously published *War Year*, a GI diary based on his Vietnam experience, and a number of sf stories) was also his master's thesis. "It's probably the only thesis ever to win a Hugo and a Nebula," he said cheerfully. "It didn't even have to be retyped."

HALDEMAN'S work methods are somewhat unusual. "I don't write the way people should," he admitted. He works the structure of the book out in advance: "That's my substitute for outlining." Then he writes out "one slow first draft," rarely correcting it. "That comes from having written poetry for 20 years," he explained. "I say a sentence over and over until it sounds right. I can spend all day on a couple of paragraphs.

"It's mentally very taxing to handle a novel," he continued. "It's psychically exhausting. And it gets harder with every book. Everybody's first novel is easy, because it's autobiographical. But your standards get higher with each book; you're under pressure to do as well as the last one."

Haldeman describes himself as a thorough perfectionist about his manuscripts. "When you retype a page of your own prose, you find yourself questioning your choices. You think, why'd I use this word here instead of that word? So you change it. Then you find out right in the next paragraph why you used that word instead of this one — because there it is," he concluded

reuefully. He said that he looks forward to buying a home computer with a word processor, which will greatly simplify the mechanics of writing.

HE WORKS, he said, eight hours a day, seven days a week at his writing, but the hours are "rather strange": He gets up at 3 a.m. and works until mid-morning ("It's a hangover from being a paperboy, I guess"). He keeps up with current science by subscribing to 20 or so scientific journals and attending the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and similar organizations. "You learn things there that won't be published for another two or three years. The scientists are very nice people — they like to sit down and talk to sf people. In fact, a lot of them went into science because they were so turned on by sf when they were growing up."

Because Haldeman worked his way up through the ranks of sf — short stories for the pulps, novellas, finally novels — both he and his wife (who is a combination of amanuensis and business manager) have a no-nonsense approach to the business end of a profession in which magazines still pay a nickel a word for stories. He chairs the Grievance Committee of the International Science Fiction Writers Association, which handles problems such as publishing contracts and serialization rights. Foreign editions and translations pose special difficulties; a great deal of pirating occurs. "Eventually," he said, "we'd like a worldwide cybernetic network to monitor translations and editions."

HALDEMAN SAID that translations contribute heavily to a sf writer's income. His wife's linguistic training helps with translations of his work, especially in the mechanics of dealing with translators, but problems continually arise. His German translator, for example, complained humorously that he had trouble with Haldeman's colloquial dialogue: "All of your American slang is genital, and German slang is anal," he said.

Haldeman said that his writing sf is natural for someone who read almost nothing else when he was a kid. "There's a great deal of freedom in sf — a wide range of plots and settings. But there are stylistic restrictions, too. SF has its roots in pulp fiction — strong action line, not too much characterization. That's still the best way to sell your first story, because the magazines are still oriented to that. Yet they rarely get a strongly plotted first yarn — people try to be too literary. After you sell the first one, experimentation can come later."

The lines between sf and 'mainstream' literature are getting thinner, Haldeman said, but he pointed out that the strongest reason has nothing to do with sf's literary value or its relative freedom from stylistic constraints. "Science fiction sells," he said succinctly, "although it's crass to point that out."

