Interview

GEORGE R. STEWART ON NAMES OF HIS CHARACTERS

[*This interview was recorded on June 29, 1959, at Berkeley, California. The interviewee is George R. Stewart (indicated below by the initial S). The interviewer is Joseph M. Backus (indicated below by the letter I). The original interview has been edited, and the final text has been checked by Mr. Stewart for accuracy. This is the second such interview to appear in* Names, *the first having been with C. S. Forester (Vol. 1, [1953], pp. 245 to 251)].*

I.   Mr. Stewart, the readers of *Names* know your work on place names and other actual names. But, as a novelist, you have also worked with character names. Can you tell me how many novels you have written ?

S.   That's an easy question for a first one. I have written seven novels.

I.   Can you give me an idea how many character names in all you have originated in your novels ?

S.   Just for a very quick estimate, I should say that I might have applied at least two hundred fictional names for characters, and in addition there would be perhaps half as many names for animals, ships, and especially for places.

I.   You have probably made up more place names than most novelists have. Wouldn't you say so ?

S.   Yes, I suppose that has been something of a specialty of mine, probably because I have been particularly interested in place names.

I.   I remember you have also named storms, forest fires, years — and probably some other inanimate objects as well. But before considering such names, I would like to ask about the names of human characters. In looking over your novels, I have found that *Doctor's Oral* contains what I suspect to be the largest number of character names — forty. Have you used any more than that in any one of your other novels ?

S.   I should think that there would be more in *Fire* and *The Years of the City* — and certainly so, if you count names of places.

I.   In any case — since, in dealing with academic life, *Doctor's Oral* comes close to your own experience — I should imagine its character names would have to have been chosen in a way that would insure their not being identified with actual persons. To achieve this end, was any system of coinage used for these names ?

S.   I should not say that there was any actual system used. I took care with the unpleasant characters to have names which probably either did not exist or would be very rare. For instance, with Professor Martiness I made up a name which as far as I know does not exist, but which in my mind was a kind of combination of Martin and Martinez. It was also suitable enough, because of being thus made up, it was a somewhat exotic name for an exotic character.

I.   Another unlikeable faculty member, Professor Brice, however, bears an actual surname that is not uncommon. Did this name cause the character to be identified with any real person ?

S. Not so far as I know. The whole name, J. MacNair Brice, is an unlikely combination, and also seemed suitable for the character, being a somewhat gadgety name for a rather gadgety person.

I. For this novel, did you draw from lists of actual names, such as telephone directories or college catalogues — as novelists are sometimes said to do ?

S. I don't think that I have ever used such lists. In *The Years of the City*, I compiled one for myself. That story deals with a very early time in Greek history when I would have had some difficulty knowing which names were in use. I went through some works which deal with this little known period, and from them compiled a list of about a hundred names actually recorded from that time. I kept this list handy when writing the book, and generally picked my names from it.

I. Did you ever make use of the names of friends or actual persons for fictional purposes ?

S. Yes — but I think in only the two novels, *Fire* and *Earth Abides*. For *Fire*, I had to draw a detailed fictional map of the whole region, and this involved supplying fictional place names. I tried to proportion these so that the name-pattern would give the effect that might be expected in the region — that is, there were some descriptive names, some incident names, and so forth. In this way, I used the names of a number of my friends — on Hart Creek, for example — and they all seemed quite pleased with it. Rather amusingly, however, one of them told me he was disappointed because his name appeared on the map, but he did not find it in the text. The reason, of course, was that I had put the names all on the map, but it was not actually needful to use that particular name in the story. I also made a few references to professors in the University in that book, who are real professors, also my friends. In *Earth Abides*, I used my own house in the story. At that time, I lived on San Luis Road in Berkeley, and so I used San Lupo Drive. That made it seem natural to refer to some of my neighbors, who lived on the street, and so, incidentally, the Hart name came in again. One of the boys there afterwards yelled at me reproachfully because I had put the Hatfields' cat in the book, but did not mention his own dog. Hutsonville in that book has also been noted by one of my friends as being named for him.

I. Sometimes in your novels the name of a character appears without introduction, as the first word. But the chief character in *Earth Abides* is known only as "he" until he identifies himself by means of his signature after the first four pages. Can you tell the purpose of withholding the name ?

S. I think that I withheld the name because here and elsewhere throughout that book I was trying to universalize the effect as much as possible, in order to make the reader feel some identification with the chief character.

I. Another question about the same character — why did you choose the unusual name Isherwood Williams for the character who survives a cosmic disaster and becomes the re-founder of the human race ?

S. You are getting, now, really deep into professional secrets. If I was going to give him the name Isherwood, a very uncommon one, I would naturally balance it to some extent by giving him a common family name, so that his full name would not seem entirely impossible. The real question, however, involves Isherwood, though he is not called that in the book. He is known as Ish, and Isherwood was

the name that I gave him so that he would have a name from which Ish could be derived. The use of Ish itself is merely a variant of the device frequently used by novelists and dramatists to give their characters universality, although at the same time to conceal it, so that the name becomes a private, or semi-private, code. In short, *ish* in Hebrew means "man."

I.   Ish's wife is called Em, short for Emma. Does this name have significance ?

S.   Well, the Hebrew for woman is *ishah*, which is, incidentally, now the trade name of a widely advertised perfume. But I could not very well have Ish meet a girl named Ishah. Em, however, is really a mother-character, and *em* means "mother" in Hebrew.

I.   Are there any more names in *Earth Abides* that have similar significance ?

S.   Most of them do not. The only other significant name is Ezra, which means "helper" in Hebrew. In fact, near the end of the book, Ish refers to Ezra as "my good helper."

I.   Did any of your readers understand the significance of these names ?

S.   At least one person wrote me. I think he was a rabbi. Rather interestingly, he inquired if I knew what the names meant, or had stumbled on them by accident.

I.   Do names in your other novels have any special significance ?

S.   I have avoided giving names, like Mr. Goodhart or Miss Flutters, which label character crudely. If I have done this, it has at least been covered up by some foreign language and has not been, I hope, too obvious. On the whole, I think that my use of names has become more free and imaginative, as my novels have progressed and I got a greater feeling of competence in what I was doing.

I.   Do you think that moving in this direction represents an improvement in novelistic technique ?

S.   I am hardly the one to make such a judgment. Probably the reason why I have moved in this direction has been that I was trying, more and more, to universalize the experience in my novels. In *The Years of the City*, I used a device which one reviewer spotted and did not like. That novel is in four parts, each one centered in a particular character, who is in each case the son of the preceding one. As the reviewer noted, the names of these characters ran in a series A, B, C, D — for their initials. (Actually, I suppose it should have been A, B, G, D, since that is the order of the Greek alphabet.) I still treasure the detail, however, that the reviewer did not notice there are five in the series, because there is finally a character who is supposed to carry the story on still farther, and his name begins with an E. These names also had some slight significance, or suggestion of it, as is pointed out in the book itself here and there. Archias, while a real Greek name of the early period, suggests the beginning, as we see in the word "archaic" itself. Bion, his son, has a name derived from a word meaning "life," and it is suggested in the book that he is given this name as a good omen, since he is born to his parents as a first child — when his father is already old — and so there is the particular need that he should cling to life. It is also a good name in the course of the novel, since Bion represents the strength of the city. Callias is from the word meaning "beauty," and this suggests that the city has left its period of strength and is moving on to a kind of aesthetic middle age. Diothemis is probably rather bad Greek, but I coined it with the suggestion that it would mean the judgment of God, since Diothemis lives in the time of the city when

it is approaching destruction, partly because of the sins of the fathers. The last one is Eschatz, which is obviously not good Greek. I used it to suggest that things had gone to pieces very badly, and that this barbarism (really a misunderstood baby name) was to be connected with the Greek word meaning "last."

I.   Can you tell me something about the name of the city itself — Phrax ?

S.   More time and thought went into the selection or fabrication of that mono-syllabic name than the reader might imagine. In the first place, there is, as far as I know, no such name in the records of antiquity. For my city, I wanted a "practical" name, that is, one which would not give too much trouble in pronunciation and one which would yield a good ethnic name — that is, Phragians — for the citizens of that city. I also did not want a Greek name, because the Greeks very rarely used a Greek name for one of their cities. So I made up a name from mere sounds, with the suggestion that this was some barbarous local name which the Greeks had taken over. There is a scene in the novel describing how they learned what the name of the place was. I used the same general practice for the other place names of the novel — that is, they are not Greek and have no meaning.

I.   When you plan a novel, do you work out the place names and the names of characters before you begin to write ?

S.   Yes, I do. Of course, in writing a novel, one often has to use names for charac-ters who may just appear incidentally, and it is not possible to think up names for them all in advance. On the whole, I would say that this is a good practice — to have names worked out ahead of time in so far as it is possible. When you are using a map, for instance, it becomes almost obligatory to get the names on the map properly, or you will get into difficulty and inconsistency before the end of the book.

I.   Among the characters in your novels, do you have a favorite name ?

S.   There are many such names — ones that I like. But at this time I might say that I think anyone — most of all perhaps the author himself — must have difficulty in separating his feeling about the name from his feeling about the character. If a character comes off successfully, you have a feeling that the name, too, comes off successfully, and so is a suitable name. In fact, this brings me to say something about characters' names more in general. Although there would seem to be "suit-able" names, the matter is not as simple as some people think. It seems to me something of a chicken-egg problem — as to which came first. It is like the argument as to whether a certain line of poetry is a good line because of its haunting rhythm or whether we think it to have a haunting rhythm because it is a good line to begin with. But to return to characters — when Shakespeare wrote a tragedy about Ham-let, did he think that Hamlet was a particularly good name for a tragic hero ? After *Hamlet* proved to be a supremely successful tragedy, the name, by that very process, became a suitable one for a tragic hero. If *Hamlet* had been a comic play, doubtless Hamlet would be a good name for a comic character. In other words, if a character comes off successfully, you naturally begin to think that his name is a suitable name for that sort of character.

I.   Can you give an example from your own work ?

S.   Well, a very minor character who appears in both *Storm* and *Fire* is Johnny Martley —

I.   Why do you call him Johnny instead of John ?

S.   Oh, just because he is never mentioned except as Johnny — though that, of course, brings up the much larger question as to how much existence a character may be said to have in a novelist's imagination aside from what goes on paper. I suppose on the books of the utility company for which he worked he was carried as John, but he is always Johnny in the novel. And since Johnny Martley makes a pair of good trochees, that is undoubtedly one reason I think of it as a suitable name for a character who had a lot of energy and a certain amount of jauntiness.

I.   Gelett Burgess, in discussing character names, indicated that he used geographical prefixes and suffixes to suggest a character's aristocratic background. Did you have any similar ideas in using Hawkhurst, or Holtby ?

S.   Everyone is likely to have certain associations with name-elements. I do not think that I have any particular predilection for names containing elements referring to place, even though I used those you mention. I think I have used such names somewhat commonly, because, by taking the elements of names apart, and then recombining them, you are often able to coin a name which seems quite familiar, and yet may not exist at all — and is therefore a safe name for a novelist to use. Holtby may be an example. It looks like a regular name, but I don't think you will find it in the telephone book.

I.   Can you say which of your names have been best accepted by readers ?

S.   I have always been pleased with the acceptance of Ponderosa National Forest. The name is in itself an obvious one, since "ponderosa" is the name of a common type of pine. To create the forest, I shoved the Plumas and Tahoe forests apart, and put the Ponderosa between them. The name was successful enough to make people stop in at the southern-most ranger station of the Plumas Forest and ask where the Ponderosa Forest was. They had been driving north through the Tahoe, expecting to come to the Ponderosa, but suddenly found themselves in the Plumas.

I.   In an article in *Names* [3(1955), p. 34], Erwin Gudde indicated that *Storm* established a precedent that meteorologists have since followed in assigning girls' names to hurricanes.

S.   I believe that is correct. The question might still be raised, however, why I called the storm Maria. As I have indicated in an introduction I wrote for a later edition of the novel, the name is to be pronounced in the English and not in the Spanish manner. For some reason, quite possibly because of the sound, Maria has come to have in English a certain loud and boisterous quality. At least, it had that association for me, and I think that this is why the storm got the name it did. ... Going back to your earlier question, I suppose that I would really have to say, on my own premises, that Maria is my favorite name. At least, it seems to be the most successful one. It has been used in a song-hit, in the line "They call the wind Maria." I have also heard on the radio that "the storm was a regular Maria" and seen such references as "Maria has become a part of American folklore."

I.   Is there anything you would like to add generally about the names in your novels ?

S.   I could certainly say a great deal more, but I think that perhaps Maria is as good a name as any with which to end.