

Special Feature

Cryptic Habits: The Hidden Lives of Midsouth Entomologists

Interview with Dr. Jerome Goddard, Mississippi State Public Health Entomologist and Fiction Novelist

C. J. Peterson, Editor, *Midsouth Entomologist*



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Chris Peterson: My first question has two parts, both with probably the same answer. Why does the state of Mississippi employ an entomologist and why are you housed in the Department of Health?

Jerome Goddard: The health department is concerned about human diseases, and some human diseases are carried by or caused by insects and other arthropods. The health department has an interest in keeping these arthropod-borne diseases at bay or abated. So they have one position called State Public Health Entomologist which heads up the health department's Entomology and Vector Control Program. I have an assistant and that is Wendy Varnado. Wendy's my helper and does most of the mosquito trapping and West Nile virus testing. The health department's interests in entomology are strictly limited to mosquitoes, mosquito-borne diseases, ticks and tick-borne diseases, head lice, bedbugs, fleas, and the diseases they carry.

CP: Do you deal strictly with humans, or is there a veterinary component?

JG: Just a little bit of veterinary work, because the health department regulates the dairy production, and is charged with the regulation of milk in our state. So sometimes our inspectors who visit those dairy farms will ask me to come out and look at entomological problems they encounter. So there's a little bit of a veterinary component.

CP: So it is a separate office that would do horse diseases, or bovine insect pests?

JG: There is a board of animal health that does all the animal stuff, however the overlap is in dairy because we [the Department of Public Health] regulate dairy and milk production.

CP: West Nile Virus; here to stay?

JG: Yes, I think West Nile is here to stay. It's firmly entrenched in the bird population. It's a bird disease; transmitted from bird to bird by various mosquitoes. Humans and horses are a dead-end host, and really of no consequence in the life cycle of the virus. So it's here, it's out there circulating around

every year. I think it's safe to say that it's going to be cyclical, dependent upon the population of the birds. In other words, the susceptibility of the bird population. When you have a big outbreak of West Nile, most of the birds become immune if they don't die. So then the next year or two or three, you don't have much West Nile. You have some, but then when the bird population becomes susceptible again you have another outbreak. So I think it will be a cycle every few years.

CP: Where are we now in the cycle? A low point?

JG: We're at a little bit of a low point right now. In 2006, we had a fairly big year, I think a hundred and eighty or ninety cases, with about fifteen deaths, and last year it was about one hundred and twenty cases. You can get these numbers off the Mississippi Department of Health website. And then this year so far [June 27, 2008] we've only had five.

CP: Do you think eradication of West Nile is even possible? If so, what would it take?

JG: I don't think it's possible at all. It would be possible if it only had humans as a host, or something that was really specific and easy to handle or treat. There is no way to control a bird disease in Mississippi. There are so many birds that are susceptible, and so many different mosquito species.

CP: What other arthropod-borne diseases do we commonly see in the Midsouth?

JG: The ones we deal with the most are of course West Nile Virus, but secondly would be Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. We have a lot of cases of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, especially in the northern one-third of the state. Maybe about thirty cases a year, with several deaths each year.

CP: That's spread by dog ticks, right?

JG: That's mostly from American dog ticks. We also deal with other tick-borne diseases, like ehrlichiosis; we have a few cases of that every year. Tularemia. Tick paralysis every now and then in a human. Lyme Disease; we have about thirty or fifty cases of Lyme Disease reported every year, whether or not they are confirmed, is another story. There's not much Lyme here. When we try to research this we have a hard time finding it in Mississippi. It's still diagnosed and still treated, but it's hard to prove that there are very many cases here. So we do deal with that. But back to the mosquitoes, there are other mosquito-borne diseases here. Saint Louis Encephalitis; we have a case or two or three every now and then. We had a huge outbreak of Saint Louis Encephalitis in the mid-1970s; three hundred and some cases and about thirty deaths. We have another one called Eastern Equine Encephalitis that every now and then pops up. It's a very tragic disease. It's been my experience that if the person is fifteen years old or younger there *will* be a funeral. It's that serious and we get that occasionally. La Crosse Encephalitis mostly affects children. The presenting symptom is seizures. So there are a lot of mosquito-borne diseases. There is a lot of non-disease stuff that I deal with as well, like spider bites, and stings, allergic reactions, food infestations, like somebody bought food at a restaurant that had maggots or beetles in it. Or with spider bites, brown recluse, black widow, brown widow. I get a lot of direct injury consultations.

CP: Are there any arthropod-borne diseases that Mississippi is in high danger of seeing, say from overseas? Is there anything you are looking for that you say "Ooh, I hope we don't get that here"?

JG: I think we always do that with malaria and dengue fever, because we have efficient vectors already present here for both of those. If they were introduced here, you might have cases in this state. So we're always watching for malaria, because people go overseas and get it, or immigrants come here and have it. And the same is true with dengue fever.

CP: So, getting to some of the reasons that I asked you here; you are a published novelist.

JG: Yes.

CP: So how many novels have you gotten published so far?

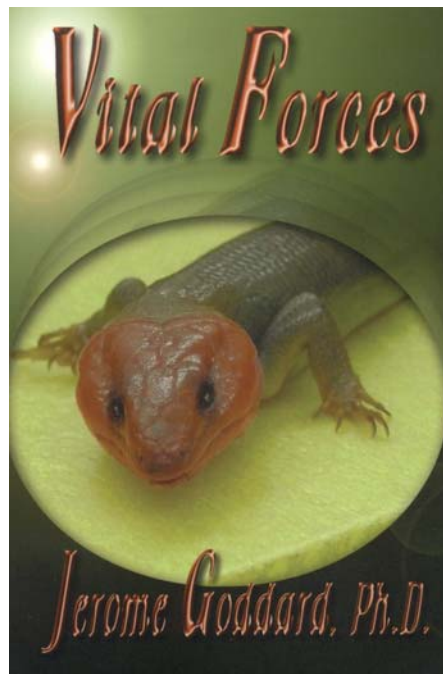
JG: I have written, that have been published, three fiction novels for adults, and two fiction novels for teenagers and one children's book, which is not really a novel, it's a science book. I have some others in the works. I have one adult fiction novel that is finished but it's not yet published.

CP: Is that a Duke Livermore novel?

JG: No, Duke is in the new novel, but not the main character.

CP: Since I mentioned Duke, how autobiographical is the character of Duke Livermore?

JG: Duke Livermore is an interesting character who occurs in three of my novels, not the first one, though. He's a herpetologist at the Ole Miss Biology Department. He's about my age or a little younger. In some ways it is me, but writing books is fun because you can do anything you want to do; it's fiction! So what I do, and I guess everybody does, is you make the character an amalgam of people you know. Of course you write what you know. I can't write about nuclear engineering; I don't know anything about it. I can't write about schistosomiasis in Thailand because I haven't been there. So you write about what you know, obviously. But Duke Livermore is not me. He's part me, but he's not me. For one thing, he's an agnostic, and very mystified, or doesn't understand matters, of faith. He just avoids them, and that's not me at all. Other aspects of Duke are indeed like me. He loves to eat! That's me, that's me for sure. Some other mannerisms and things he does are me.



CP: When you create a character like him, how difficult is it to keep the character believable, and not turn him or her into such a stereotype of what you want to say that they are no longer interesting?

JG: I'm not really good at that; I'm not good at characterization. Different people come at it from different ways. Some people focus on the characters, it doesn't even matter about the plot, it's the characters. If you've got really good characters, it doesn't matter what is happening. That kind of wonderful characterization is what people love. Some people downplay the characters and don't even describe them. It's all about the plot and what's happening; the storyline. What I do is try to do both, but my books are more-so plot driven than character driven. Some of that is me being a scientist. I have in my mind what I want to happen. I start with an outline: "this is what I want to happen, and I'm going to make that happen." Sometimes that is bad, because that restricts the characters and they don't get developed fully. Other people, and I know some writers, who sit down and they don't have a clue where things are going or what is going to happen. They just let it happen! It simply mystifies me that someone can write like that. They say "well, I don't know what's going to happen; I'm just going to write." Well how can you not know what's going to happen? You're the writer! There're differences in the way people write. I have a feeling that the artsy way of just letting it develop is perhaps better than my way. But, I try to make my characters real. One thing I do is I read my dialog out loud. Then I'll say "that sounds stupid" and I'll go back and change it. Or I'll get somebody to listen to it when I read it to them. Dialog should sound natural. And another thing; you have to throw out all the rules of English. Just throw 'em out, because nobody goes by them anyway. People speak in pieces of sentences, so you have to learn to write that way.

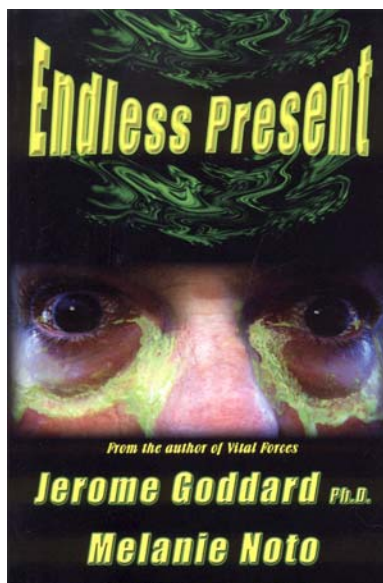
CP: So, being trained as a scientist, is it difficult to switch gears sometimes to write fiction, and being more conversational than technical, as we tend to be?

JG: You know, what is really scary is that it is easy for me to switch back and forth from fiction to non-fiction. That's very scary and it worries me. It worries me that I've written fiction into my scientific writing. It also worries me that I might have hurt my objectivity. It concerns me that I might make my science too fictionalized or too simplistic. The world is very complex, and one of the biggest faults of a scientist is to over-simplify. I do that all the time; I'll oversimplify and say "it's this, it's clearly this." So, I think it's easy to switch from fiction to non-fiction. I don't know if that is healthy, but it's really easy for me. This may be getting ahead of you, but it's the same thing with the children's books. For some reason, I don't have to think hard to get down on the children's level. I don't even have to try. It just comes out naturally to speak to a third grader. I just speak in their language. As for the children's books, and even the teen books, it's easy for me to speak on that level, and I don't know what that means. It's sort of scary if you think about it. Am I that stupid? Is that the way I really think? Is that my level of thought?

CP: Think of it that you are very empathetic and connected to your audience.

JG: Maybe. I don't know.

CP: Your novel *Endless Present* was co-authored with another writer, Melanie Noto. I know how co-authoring works in science, how does that work with fiction?



JG: Co-authoring works different ways with different partnerships and how they do it. The way this worked, in my particular book with Melanie Noto, she's a romance writer. She's a great writer who can write very vividly. She's wonderful in the way she describes people and their looks. So what I did was, I knew her from some other social interactions, and I told her I had a story idea. I asked her "could I write it and you help me?" So that's how we did this; I wrote the story, gave it to her, she developed some parts of it more fully. In other words, none of the plot was hers; none of the ideas were hers. It was the character development, the scene description and stuff like that. That's how we did it. Now I suspect this changes a lot with other partnerships. You'll see lots of times a scientist, or a lawyer or whatever that's not a fiction writer, will have some idea of a story and then they'll hire a writer to write it. That's how they'll do it. In my case, I'd already written two novels, so I sort of knew how to write, I wanted her to help me with that aspect. Some people say, and I have been told by people who have read the book, that they can tell where my writing stops and hers starts and when mine starts again. If that is true, I probably need to not have a co-author that again. I need to stick to my own writing. Because that's more natural.

CP: I thought it flowed very well, actually. *The Well of Destiny* was your first one, right?

JG: *The Well of Destiny* was my first novel. It's a very emotional book, but not very well written. It was my first attempt. I wish I had not gotten it published so quickly. I wish I had waited on it. It's not well developed, but, like I said, it is the most emotional. It talks about being a Southerner, and coming home, it's all about going home. The whole book is about going home, and the emotions that you have to face in life.

CP: So when you are writing for children, how does that change, as far as expressing emotions, plot elements that sort of thing?

JG: Well, I haven't written a children's fiction book, but in my teen fiction books, I try to make it really simple. I try not to have a lot of switches in point of view. I try not to even do that at all; I do have a few. In other words, in a book for adults, you know how you will be writing and then you will separate

the next few paragraphs as another point of view. In other words, "John walked into the café, blah blah blah." And then the next section is "Duke swatted a fly in his office." You know, you've switched the point of view and it all somehow works together for the story. But for a kid, ten years old, that's hard for them. They have a hard time following that. So what I try to do in a kid's book, I don't always do it, but try to do it, is let that point of view always be continuous. In other words, where that person is, is always the point of view. Almost like a first person thing; but it's not really written in first person. I try not to switch around the point of view. I try to make it very simple. I also try to make the concepts relatively simple. I try to have one or two little points I want to make. Another thing on the teen writing is I try to get into the magical. I mean, not the supernatural, but mystery, and treasures, and monsters. Kids love that stuff! Fantasies and fairies. That's what I try to tap into because they love that. Every great teen book is about exploring a cave, or exploring a castle, or finding a treasure. That's always going to be interesting to a child or teen.

CP: What's the most difficult thing about writing, regardless of whether it's children, or teen, or adult?

JG: I know this sounds stupid, but the most difficult part of writing a book is writing a book. Just sitting down and making yourself do it. That's the most difficult part. People make the mistake, I think, of trying to say "okay, I'm going to have it all figured out before I start." You can't; you just have to start. You just have to begin. An outline is important, but you don't have to have it perfect to start. What I do is just write it, even if it's bad. I just do it, even if it's awful. I just write the book, even if it just makes you want to throw up. Because you can always add to it, you can always fluff it up. After you get it down, then you're where you want to be. I actually hate writing fiction. I hate it, but I love it when I'm finished. I love it when I'm finished, because when I'm finished, then I can sit back and think it through in my mind and say "okay, let's move this person here, let's do this..." That's fun to me. But to get it down the first time is very difficult for me. So I think people make the mistake of thinking it is a daunting task that will take a year, or whatever, and they just never start. I say just start. Just start and don't worry about it. I used to hear people say "well, I write four pages a day." I used to think "well, that's easy, anybody could write four pages a day." Try it. I dare you to try that, it's hard to do; make yourself write four pages a day. I heard one writer I knew, I knew her very well, she said "on a good day I write twenty pages" and I thought "well, I can write twenty pages." No, I can't write twenty pages in a day. It's just not possible for me.

CP: Was fiction writing something you've always enjoyed doing, or is it something you came into later?

JG: I didn't start fiction writing until I was thirty. Never even started it. I guess I wanted to do it because I'm from Mississippi, and I come from a long line of storytellers. Everybody in Mississippi is a storyteller. And so, I thought "well, I could do that. I think I could do that." So I started doing it and I wasn't any good, I didn't know what to do, I didn't have a clue how to do it. I just did the best I could. The more I did it, a little bit better I got. I'm still not there. I'm not as good as so many people, but I'm getting better. I know more how to do it now than I used to. It's just like running or lifting weights, the more you do it the better you get. Now, having said that, I do believe there are people who are just naturally gifted. It just flows out of them; like a gift. Eudora Welty, or whoever. Man, they don't even have to learn it, it's just a gift. But for most people, most normal people, average people, if they want to write a book they're really going to have to exercise the discipline.

CP: So if I were an aspiring writer, that's what you would tell me to get started? Just be disciplined, just sit down and do it?

JG: Just do it, and don't get discouraged if your first one, or your first half or your first whatever is just awful. Don't be discouraged. You just have to keep trying. Go to a writer's club. They have writer's clubs. I've never really been in one, but I know people who are. You go those writer's club meetings, and they'll encourage each other, they'll read portions of their work. They offer criticism, they offer encouragement. So I think those writer's clubs things are good. I also think a class in creative writing at a local college is a good idea. Gives you some idea of the basic elements of storytelling, like suspense and conflict. You've got to have those things in a story. You've got to have some conflict or a moral dilemma, or whatever. There are certain elements of a story that have never changed since

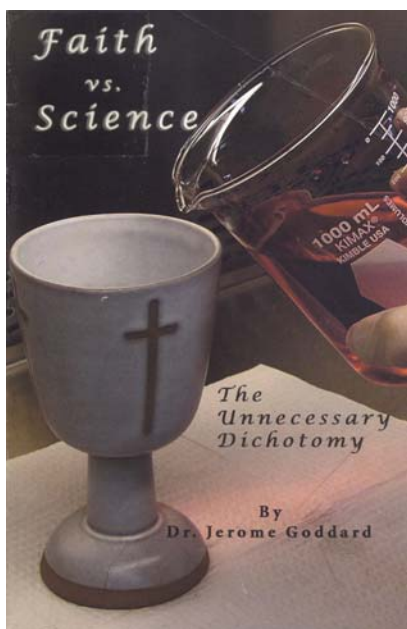
the beginning of time. If you go back and read Homer, or something ancient like that, the oldest stuff, if you read it, it had the same elements we have in stories today. A moral dilemma, a conflict, or whatever. Or maybe character development.

CP: Somewhere I heard that there are only like twenty-five possible plots in the whole world.

JG: I don't know if that number's correct, but you are exactly right. There are only so many ways to tell a story.

CP: So who's novels are on your nightstand? Who do you get excited about when you hear something new is coming out?

JG: I actually like Mary Higgins Clark. I read almost all of her stuff. I've read a little bit of her daughter's stuff, but I don't like it as well. Mary Higgins Clark is a master of suspense. I also like John Grisham's stuff, not all of them, but I generally like John Grisham's novels. I also like some of the old literature, like Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor wrote two novels, I've read them both, and she wrote a lot of short stories. Flannery O'Connor knew and understood Southern culture and religion more than anyone I've ever seen. She just understood those concepts so well. And of course, William Faulkner, like *The Bear*, some of those stories I just really like.



CP: Switching away from fiction now. One book you've written is *Faith vs. Science*. First of all, I love the cover! The cover is genius, with the flask and the wine and the chalice. What prompted you to write that book? Was there a specific issue in the news, or did you just feel there was a general need to have this discussion?

JG: That book, *Faith vs. Science*, took me fifteen years to write. It's really nothing more than me working through scientific issues and their relationship to my own faith. That's really all it was, me trying to work through these conflicts. Any scientist faces this same kind of conflict at some level. So you have to ask yourself, if you are a person of faith, you have to ask yourself "what do I believe about this or that, in relation to what is known from science?" So this book was a personal journey, actually, and it started out as a series of essays. And then later, I began to think "you know, I might could put these together in a book." So I tell people, when I sign books at places, and they buy that book, I say "you must read the preface." I tell every person "you've got to read the preface before you read the book." And they look at me funny, but that's the most important part of that book. It says why I did it, and it sets forth the whole context of the book.

CP [reading]: "Why we need prophets, poets, and philosophers – and always will."

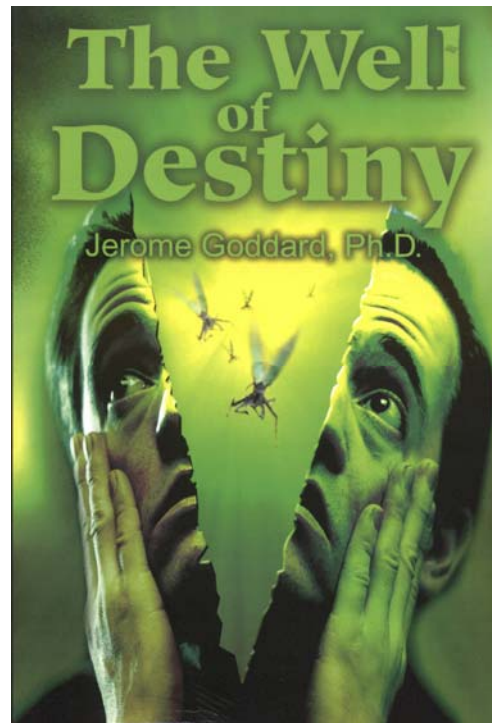
JG: That's the title of the first chapter. Which brings up another thing; you'll notice that the book starts out real general. It starts out with that chapter on why we even need poets. Why do we need poets? Why do we need philosophers? What it tries to say is that even if you know everything in the world, there are still aspects of humanity that are not explained by known facts. And so there's this other realm, this artsy realm, the philosophy, faith, and other aspects of humanity. So in the book I start out real broad like that, trying to hook the reader. And then go into more specifics. And then I end with my own personal views, which a person doesn't have to accept, but that's how I am personally.

CP: And when you are writing the book you can put whatever you want.

JG: When it's your book you can say what you want to say! That's right!

CP: The 2008 *Writer's Market* book is several inches thick. How in the world would somebody go about picking out a publisher?

JG: That is a really good question, and it is very frustrating to anybody who wants to become an author. You seemingly can't get anybody to read anything of yours. It's very frustrating. *The Writer's Market* is a great place to start. You look in there, it tells most of the publishers, it tells what they're looking for, it tells whether or not they will accept unsolicited manuscripts or not. Most will not. Many of the big publishers in New York will not even open stuff if you send it to them. Don't even bother! They won't open it. In those cases, it says in the writer's handbook "we accept submissions from agents only." So that leaves most people with some regional publishers, and such as that. So what I did, just a little side road here, I have self-published a couple of my books. *The Well of Destiny* is a print-on-demand book. That's a new thing now, this print-on-demand thing. It's like self-publishing. There are these companies that do it for you, for like \$500, and then it's sold on Amazon, it's sold just like any other book. However, print-on-demand has drawbacks. To a big-time library, or the *New York Times*, they're not going to review your book, because they'll say "that's print-on-demand." They don't like print-on-demand. So, I did only one or two of my books that way. I think I did *Well of Destiny* and that teenage book as print-on-demand.



CP: Was that *The Mystery of the Talking Dogs*?

JG: No, there's actually three stories in one. The one that you read, *The Mystery of the Talking Dogs* is the one on the Internet; the one on my website. But I later put three teen stories into one, called *The Robin's Cliff Mysteries Series*. It's a print-on-demand book. So that's one avenue for somebody. If you just can't get published anywhere, do that print-on-demand thing. It's nothing to be ashamed of. You're not trying to get rich anyway; I mean I'm not. Most people aren't going to be like John Grisham, anyway. So if you just want to publish a book for the sake of doing it, and to feel good about what you did, print-on-demand is fine. Now what happened with me was that for a long time, I would send out query letters, getting the addresses from *The Writer's Market*, and I would send out letters and get either no response, or a form letter saying "thanks but no thanks." So I kept writing, kept writing, kept writing. Finally, after several years, I got a letter that had a hand-written card that said "hmm, this is fairly good. Keep trying, you know. Maybe next time." And I thought "that's odd!" Then, a few months later, from a different publisher, I got a response that said "if you will change this and this, and move this, we *might* reconsider it." So, see what's happening, and I didn't realize it, I was making progress. I was starting to get their attention. My first real break was with a university press. The University of West Alabama has a press called Livingston Press which specializes in southern fiction. The editor of Livingston Press sent me a letter, a long letter about *Vital Forces*, which said "if you'll change the plot blah blah blah, then I'll probably take it." So anyway, I did that, and then he didn't take it. Changed his mind at the last minute for some reason. But, the changes he suggested made the book much better. Then I heard about a publisher in Arizona, not print-on-demand, a legitimate publisher, called TrebleHeart Press.¹ It's a regional press in Arizona that has some authors who are sort of famous and who have won all kind of awards. So it's a legitimate press, it's just regional. Since I had just revised the book for the editor of Livingston Press (and he rejected it), it was all ready to go. So I sent it to the executive editor or TrebleHeart and she

¹ www.trebleheartbooks.com

liked it. I've had two books published now with Treble Heart, it's really WhoooDoo Mysteries Division, but it's all under Treble Heart. This woman does a great job. Her company edits manuscripts extensively before publishing them. I think *Vital Forces* was edited three times before it was ever published. It drove me crazy, but was worth it in the end. But anyway, back to the question. People who want to write a book need to be patient. Don't give up; don't let the rejections beat you down. Somebody said that Margaret Mitchell was rejected many times for her manuscript *Gone with the Wind*.

CP: You mentioned that you do have an e-book that's on your website, *The Mystery of the Talking Dogs*. Why do you think that e-books haven't taken off in popularity?

JG: That's a good question. My book *Endless Present* is also in e-book form on Fictionwise². That book is on Fictionwise and I can see where people have bought it because there are a few little reviews or remarks. But only about three or four people have ever read it digitally. So, digital publishing, e-books, and the little hand-held readers, like Amazon³ has, are relatively new technologies. I don't know what to think about that and it's future. There are some people, especially young people, who love it and enjoy it, but I still think the old-fashioned print book is still the best way to go. Maybe it's just because I'm old, but if you look around on a plane, people are reading real books. They're reading *paper books*. Not e-books with a hand-held reader. There's something about the perspective of paper and ink.

CP: I read *1984* as an e-book. I got done and didn't feel like I'd *read* it.

JG: That's right. That's how I feel. There's something about the perspective of reading a real book in your hand. So, for some reason, digital books haven't taken off very much. I don't know if they ever will.

CP: That comes to the end of the questions that I had. Are there any thoughts you'd like to include?

JG: I would just like to say that I think scientists need not be afraid to pursue the arts or the humanity side of themselves. I think sometimes we're too compartmentalized and we think that if we reveal these parts of our lives to others we'll be thought less of, or ostracized. I think that's wrong. Humans should be integrated and try to integrate all the different realms of humanity. I think that's very important to make oneself mentally and emotionally healthy. I think a person can be the smartest person in the world, but if they don't develop those other aspects of their humanity I think they're really warped and dysfunctional. For example, Einstein. Great example. Probably the smartest man that had ever lived, but he apparently had a miserable personal life. He had a couple of failed marriages, and was estranged from his son; I don't think they even talked. So, sometimes we put so much energy in our scientific lives that we forget that there are other parts of our lives and we need to focus on them. I know there's a lot of pressure to get grants and to do scholarly work, I know all that. But, I think it's just as important to develop healthy social relationships and participate in the arts. Take a walk, watch a sunset, pet a dog, go to a concert, or read a book. Try painting a picture.

[Editor's notes: Dr. Goddard's personal website is www.jeromegoddard.com and the Mississippi Department of Health Entomology and Vector Control Program website is <http://www.msdh.state.ms.us/msdhsite/static/14,0,119.html>. The cover art for *Vital Forces* and *Endless Present* are copyright of WhoooDoo Mysteries, a Division of Treble Heart Books. The cover art for *The Well of Destiny* is copyright of iUniverse Inc⁴. The cover art of *Faith vs. Science* and Dr. Goddard's photo are copyright of Dr. Jerome Goddard. All images are used by permission of the respective copyright holders.]



² www.fictionwise.com

³ www.amazon.com

⁴ www.iuniverse.com