

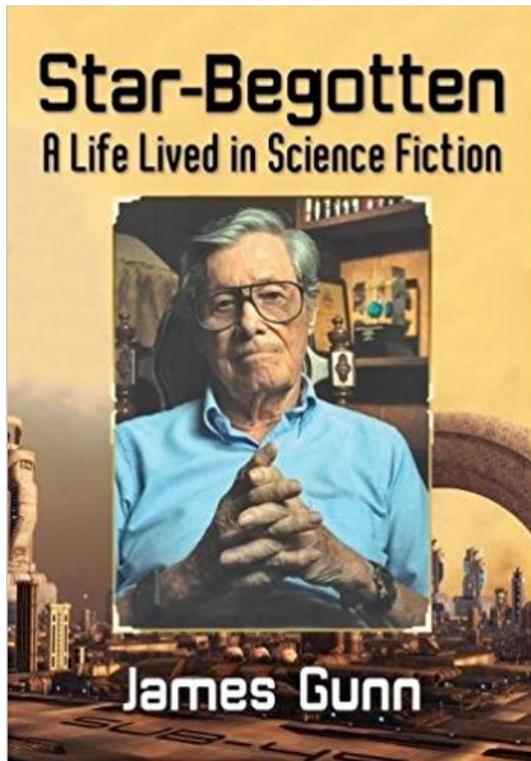
Speaking With Serling

Science Fiction Grandmaster James Gunn Discusses His [Unfinished Interview](#) with Rod Serling

by [Christopher Conlon](#)

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James Gunn's celebrated career in science fiction began in 1949 with his first professional story sale ("Paradox" in Thrilling Wonder Stories), and continues on to this day. In 2017 alone he brought out two new books: Transformation, the final novel in an SF trilogy published by Tor, and his memoir [Star-Begotten: A Life Lived in Science Fiction](#), from McFarland.



In between there have been novels (Star Bridge with Jack Williamson, This Fortress World, The Listeners), nonfiction books (including a Hugo Award-winning study of Isaac Asimov), a TV series (The Immortal), and the Grand Master Award from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. In the late 1960s Dr. Gunn initiated a series of filmed interviews with well-known science fiction writers at the University of Kansas, where he served as a professor. One of his interview subjects was Rod Serling.

Q. How did your interview with Rod Serling come about?

A. Student Union Activities at that time was sponsoring annual events, speakers

and performers, and Serling was scheduled to speak in Hoch Auditorium. Maybe because of Serling's *Twilight Zone* and my own reputation as a science-fiction writer and scholar, and maybe because my wife and I volunteered to host a reception after his talk, I found myself driving him around the campus the day of his arrival. We seemed to get along and I asked him if he would be willing to do a film interview that

afternoon if we could make arrangements.

I had already completed the eleven films of what later became known as “[The Literature of Science Fiction film series](#)” with the indispensable help of Alex Lazzarino, director of a section of Continuing Education called Extramural Independent Studies. Alex was a dynamic and dominating director, who found the financing and the personnel to make the filming possible, and he got a cameraman and sound recorder together within an hour. We did the interview in a room on campus set up for the purpose where we had previously recorded the other films in the series (except for the Damon Knight film, which was recorded in the Lazzarinos’ living room; the majority were done on site).

Q. What do you remember about conducting the interview itself? What were your impressions of Serling as a person?

A. We hadn’t planned anything or discussed what we might talk about—except that it would concern his experience with *Twilight Zone*, so everything on the film was off the cuff, like a normal conversation. Serling was remarkably at ease and easy to interview, no doubt from long experience. He didn’t display any Hollywood pretensions or literary fame. It was a pleasant occasion. I thought it was remarkable then, and still do, that he agreed to something from a stranger that was so unexpected.

Q. Why was the interview never finished?

A. Alex left Continuing Education not too long afterwards to join the Menninger Clinic as a fundraiser and project manager, and personnel for editing the films (I had others uncompleted and still do) was more complicated in those days when the sound and film had to be synchronized. I had original plans to produce 18 films that would cover a broad range of science-fiction topics and be useful in the classroom at a time when teaching science-fiction was still in its early days. I wanted to get film topics featuring Robert Heinlein and Ray Bradbury, for instance, but was never able to make arrangements.

I didn’t finish the Serling film, however, because I felt the film wouldn’t be complete without clips from *Twilight Zone* to illustrate Serling’s anecdotes, and we were unable to get permission to use them—or, at least, we didn’t have the right personnel and resources to obtain permission. I also would

have filmed an introduction that would have placed Serling's film and literary career into perspective.

Q. How did the raw footage from the interview end up on YouTube?

A. The film footage languished until ten years after Serling's death when a Kansas City public television station asked for permission to show it as part of a memorial program, and that seemed like a good use. It was also borrowed for the use of parts of Serling's comments on a national TV program about his life and work. More recently [it showed up on YouTube](#). I don't know how that happened.

Q. Serling has an unusual place in SF; his is a famous name associated with it, but he was never really "of" the field. He didn't come up through the magazines or fandom, and was already very famous when he created *Twilight Zone*. What are your thoughts regarding Serling's place in the history of science fiction?

A. Serling put an important face on science fiction. He was one of the major influences in bringing it into the mainstream of popular acceptance, which began after World War II and progressed through the efforts of authors such as Robert Heinlein to broaden its appeal into slick magazines, juveniles, and film. In addition, and perhaps as important, he respected the field by translating stories into television with faithfulness to their source, unlike most visual media adaptations (like, for instance, the adaptation of my own *The Immortal*). And he did this with a modesty about his own contributions and over difficulties that he recounted in the interview.

As a postscript, my wife got the flu the day Serling arrived and wasn't up to hosting the reception. The Lazzarinos volunteered to be the hosts and saved the day (and we called Jane's illness "the Rod Serling flu"). She never got to meet him. And that was my only contact with him as well.

Many thanks to Dr. Gunn for taking the time for this interview.

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