

BOOKS AND IDEAS PODCAST

With Ginger Campbell, MD

Episode #44

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Interview with #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author, Karen Traviss

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INTRODUCTION

Hi. I'm Ginger Campbell, and you are listening to ***Books and Ideas***. This is [Episode 44](#). Today's episode is a little unusual, because it is an interview with science fiction author, [Karen Traviss](#), who has written a series of novels based on the popular videogame, [Gears of War](#). Now, I know many of you do not play videogames, and some of you may not even like science fiction; but I think you'll still enjoy this interview.

I would like to mention that the interview is spoiler-free. Even though we do talk about the events in the most recent game, [Gears of War 3](#), which was released in October of 2011, we do not give anything away, for the sake of those of you who might be planning to play the game but have not yet done so. If you have no interest in videogames, you will see that this is a story you can enjoy without ever having anything to do with the games.

One other thing before I get into the interview: if you are a gamer, and you're on [Xbox LIVE](#), you can send me a friend request. It won't surprise those of you who are long-term listeners, but my gamer tag is [DocARTEMIS](#).

Or you can send me email at docartemis@gmail.com. You can also find previous episodes of the show, detailed show notes for all episodes, and episode transcripts at booksandideas.com, or virginiacampbellmd.com.

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INTERVIEW

Ginger: Karen, I want to welcome you to [Books and Ideas](#), and thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

Karen: Nice to talk to you, Ginger.

Ginger: Would you mind starting off by telling us a little bit about yourself and your writing career, and in particular, how it is that you happened to become a science fiction writer?



Karen: Well, I've written for a living, pretty well all my life. I started out, actually, as an advertising copywriter; that was my first writing job. I retrained very soon after that as a newspaper journalist. If I can divide my career up into chunks, it's basically 10 years in newspapers, 10 years in TV, and then I did 10 years in public relations for a government organization, dealing with politicians.

I have to say that the 10 years in public sector, public relations, dealing with politicians was the most character-forming and educational of my life, really. There are things you see from the journalistic side that, when you put them together with what you see from the other side gives you, shall we say, a sort of full PhD in the University of Life.

Ginger: Well, that certainly comes through in your writing, because you seem to be able to write the different characters' points of view in a very convincing manner. So, were you a war correspondent?

Karen: Let's roll back a bit as to how I actually got into fiction. I was so fed up with my PR career that I wanted out. And I was talking to a career counselor on yet another management training scheme funded by the taxpayer, and he said, 'Look, if you really want out, let's see what we can do.' He said, 'Have you got any hobbies?' I didn't want to go back to television; I didn't want to go back to newspapers—'You can never go back, grasshopper,' as they say.

He went through all my hobbies—and I don't have very many, because all I do is write. And I happened to say that I wrote fiction occasionally, for a hobby. And he said, 'Have you never thought of doing that for business?' He said, 'You've been writing factual stuff all your life. Why don't you just make that transition?' And at that moment I really did have that proverbial light bulb come on over my head, and I thought, *Well, yes!*

So, I used all my business skills, and I did a five-year business plan, and I planned it out, and I did my market research; and I hit all the targets. Within about six months of my first novel being published, I had to give up the day job to work full-time at writing. And I've never really looked back. That was in 2004. So, it was a fairly instant career.

One of the last journalistic jobs I did before I went into PR was as a defense correspondent. Unfortunately, I managed to pick a period between major wars—which is very hard to do these days. But I spent a lot of time, mainly around the [Royal Navy](#), a fair bit of time with the [Army](#), generally getting to know people—they would let me play with their kit.

I actually came from a service town. I come from [Portsmouth](#). It's the home of the Royal Navy. It's part of our culture. Most of my family had either served in the Army or Navy, or worked in the dockyards. I'd done a little time in the Reserves, myself; first in the [Royal Naval Auxiliary Service](#), and then when that was disbanded, I spent some time in the [Territorial Army](#) in a very, very safe job.

I don't want anyone to think I'm GI Jane; I'm not. I don't do anything like the truly dangerous work that our men and women in uniform do; so I don't want to be included with them, because I am basically not worthy of that respect. I did a very safe job. And I just want to make it clear to people, because there is a tendency for people to inflate what I do into something truly dangerous, and it wasn't.

Ginger: But what you told me does explain how you are able to write what you write. I have to admit, as I was reading the [Gears of Wars books](#), and at the time didn't really know anything about your background, I was wondering how you were able to put yourself in the shoes of those characters. And now I really get it—including [Chairman Prescott](#).

Karen: Yes. Prescott had some very bad press; but as you finally work through the books, and then the game, and then the comics—and I wrote them all—you will start to see the choices that he had.

The way I write (in fact, I [blogged](#) about it today—which is, at the time of recording, Tuesday, the 27th—trying to explain to people the process I use for writing), it is basically a dissociative process. I get inside the heads of the characters. I have to step into another world. It almost becomes like a self-induced nightmare or dream; that you have to make that situation real for yourself, so that you feel it, so that you can describe that—almost like reporting—to the reader, or the viewer, or the gamer.

In terms of characters, I write very tight [third person POV](#), and I jump from head to head. Now, a lot of people use tight third person POV as almost a substitute for first person. I'm head-hopping: You go from one character's viewpoint to the next, and you, as the reader, or the audience, or whatever, have to make up your mind who you're going to believe. You just see their point of view.

And I can actually do this. I'm not sure how I developed that technique, but I really can see the world as they see it. And, of course, the thing about everybody is that we all make sense to ourselves. So, even if I'm writing what appears to be the worst villain in the world, nobody sees themselves as evil, or bad, or whatever. Even the worst serial killer does not sit there thinking, *God, I'm evil today.*

Bad fiction does paint it like that; but all my fiction is character-driven. It is all about creating, or developing, or fleshing out believable three-dimensional people, and then putting them in an environment and seeing how they interact. It's almost like running a computer program. I don't plot things out.

A lot of writers will spend a long time putting a plot together, and then shoehorning characters into it. I work the opposite way around—partly, I think, because of my journalistic background—to take a bunch of people and effectively say, *Let me watch what you do, and ask you questions about it, so I know why you're doing what you're doing.* And I see them react.

And that means when I'm writing a story, or I'm writing basically anything for any medium, I will be shocked and surprised frequently by what the characters do. Many times I will be taken aback, and think, *I really wish you hadn't done that, Character X*; and then I realize, *No, I'm simply following what you're doing.* And that is what creates the power of it. It is doing what real people do.

[Siren sounds]

Sorry about the siren in the background; we lead a thrilling life...

Ginger: Where do you live?

Karen: I actually live in the middle of [Wiltshire](#). I'm in a small country town, and that's probably the first time I've heard a siren in years—right on cue!

Ginger: I'm sorry about interrupting you—but it seems to me that the great fiction writers all listen to the characters. And that I find just amazing, because as a nonfiction person, I can't quite imagine doing that. I can see, after you tell me about what you did before—journalism, television, and PR—how that all fed into your being ready to make it as a writer. Still, being able to do fiction, it's just totally beyond my ken.

But, getting back into *Gears of War*, I know you're used to being interviewed by the videogame magazines, and those are all people who know the story very intimately; for the sake of my listeners who might not, perhaps you might just give us a brief description of the world from your point of view.

Karen: It's basically a world that's dying; and it's dying for a reason that it doesn't know. It's a world very much like earth. They've been at war—various factions—for decades, fighting over the equivalent of oil (which we call “Imulsion”). And then, when they finally declare peace after, I think it's 80 years, they have 6 weeks of this very fragile peace before something completely unexpected happens: another sentient species—or what they only see as another sentient species—literally erupts from the ground and starts slaughtering them.

They have no idea why; they have no idea what this bipedal species wants, other than to kill them and to take over their land; they have no communication with them whatsoever. And *Gears of War* follows the lives of a squad of soldiers—the [Gears](#), as they're called—as they try to survive in a very shrinking human world.

This is a planet that goes from a population of billions to a handful, in a course of about 15 years.

So, one of the compelling things about it for me was there was very little in the actual story bible when the first game came out. The company that makes it—which is [Epic Games](#)—was very smart, very savvy about not overpopulating their world. They knew what they did best, which was to do this absolutely magnificent shooter game.

What really appealed to me initially about *Gears of War* (and this is a story I've told many, many journalists, but it is so true and so shocking, I always repeat it anyway), in 2006 I had the TV on in the background when I was writing—as I always do, just to get a bit of what I call “newsroom noise”—and I heard the cover version of “Mad World” that was out at the time. And I looked at the TV screen, and it was this breathtaking piece of [game footage](#).

Actually, I didn't know what it was; I didn't know it was *Gears of War*. It was the character I now know to be Marcus Fenix, just stooping to pick up some rubble—this shattered cherub's head—in this devastated city. He looks at it; he hears something kicking around in the rubble. It's the enemy—or the [Locust](#); known as “grubs”—and he starts running. From that moment I thought, *Oh, my God, that is amazing! Who is he, and what's happened to his world?—not, isn't that a great piece of CGI, but, I want to know about that world.*

Anyway, I totally forgot about it; went back to work. Fast forward to January 2008, I get a call from a publisher saying, ‘Would you do a rush job for us? We've got a first-person shooter game, or something that needs doing—urgent job.’ I'll be honest; I'm not terribly trusting of this publisher, for various reasons. I said, ‘Well, you'd better tell me what it is. I'm not going to commit to it or talk any further until I've checked this out. I'm very wary.’

And they said, ‘OK; it’s called *Gears of War*.’ I said, ‘Well, I’ve never heard of it’—which is good, because I like to come to things absolutely cold; I can’t tackle things I know, or I’m a fan of, or anything. So, I got on to a gentleman very well known to the gaming community, who was featured in *Time* magazine more than once—[Jerry Holkins](#) of [Penny Arcade](#); a good friend. I said, ‘Jerry, I can’t tell you why—no names, no pack-drill—but if I said *Gears of War* to you, what would your response be?’ And he shot back an email, ‘It’s Traviss town. Do it!’

So, I thought, *Well, Jerry’s recommendation is good enough for me, but I just want to be absolutely sure.* So, I did an Internet search, and the YouTube clips came up for *Gears of War*; and it was that promo that had knocked my socks off in 2006. And it was like, *I’m meant to do that; I’ve got to do that.* I didn’t even ask how much. I just got straight back on to the publisher and said, ‘Yes. Done; sold!’

And then I met Epic Games. We had a conference call. It was corporate love at first sight; and the most extraordinary process. I mean this is something for the [cognitive psychologists](#) in your audience. Despite the fact that they hadn’t overpopulated what we call the ‘story bible’—they hadn’t planned the story out; just a few headline points from the start of the arc to the end—it was almost as if we had all lived in this world at some time, but didn’t remember it, until somebody showed us a piece of artwork, and then all the memories came flooding back.

We had almost a hive mind when we were creating things. We would see the same things—literally. The same names would come up, the same design elements would come up, just from the few utterly perfect pieces of art and occasional dialogue lines that they would give me—because I’d seen the cinematics from the first game.

I don't know how it works. We don't have any common cultural base. They would make cultural references—being Americans—that I have no experience of. But somehow we saw this fully realized world exactly the same way. And it was the most extraordinary creative experience. I've never had anything like it before; I know I'll never have anything like it since.

And it has been a very transcendent thing for me. I've done a lot of work—I'm on my 22nd, 23rd novel; I write games, comics, the lot—but this was different; this was special. And it gave me room to explore what I call the 'realities.' Everyone laughs at games, unless they know them, and says, 'Oh, it's all meatheads, and blowing stuff up.' No, *Gears* isn't. Yes, it's a very visceral game, but the intelligence and the heart behind it, and the enormous potential in it is what makes it special.

The [third game](#) has just come out; and I wrote that game. I'm now switching back to the books, and I'm writing the fifth book, which is about the time that the main character, Marcus Fenix, has spent in prison. But it's also looking at what his father did. His father is a physicist; he's a weapons physicist. He was responsible for a WMD that the government had to deploy a year after the invasion by the grubs, to try to deny assets to them, to try to destroy the cities; to stop them, basically, using weapons, using materials. (They actually end up killing more of their own people than the enemy does.)

But this is his father. And a lot of the book, I'm finding as I'm writing, is about looking at how far he's prepared to go—where his ethical scientific line is; where his ethical medical line is—because he then, by default, starts getting dragged into an area that is not his personal discipline. His late wife has been... She was an embryologist... I'd better not spoil it too much—the storyline—but this is a man working outside his comfort zone.

Last night I went through a whole scene where he's having this moral debate with another scientist. And I suddenly thought, *This is what's special about Gears of War, and about any tie-in, any franchise work that is done in an intelligent way.* It was what a critic colleague of mine calls my 'ethical work.' I do a lot of ethics. I write military fiction, not political fiction, but the ethical thing—the line between us and them; the line between what we will do and not do; the line between those we will treat well and those we will abuse—is the major underpinning. There's a lot of [politics of identity](#) stuff in it.

And I'm thinking when this book comes out I will get your average gamer, your average *Gears* player—who people will think, *Oh, you know, they're not intellectuals*—they will come back to me with emails and say, 'You've really thought about that page; about whether anything he does is justified, how far he can go in weapons testing.' They're really looking at real, everyday, current issues; the sort of thing you see on the news. And you can introduce people to that; people are more likely to look at it, read it, and think about it, than if you shoved some learned tome in front of them.

People say to me, 'Well, look, you're a serious writer. Why do you do this?' I say, 'Because hundreds of thousands, even millions of people will, with the game, see this and think about these issues.' I don't give them answers. I can't give them answers; I don't have those answers. But there's still that bit of journalist in me that says, 'Look at this; ask what's going on; think about it. And then, when you're in the real world, think, *Why am I being told that; who wants me to know that; what do I need to know to make sense in my world; what's right, what's wrong?*'

And that's all, I suppose, I'm doing, is that I am putting people in someone else's shoes for five minutes, so they can step outside their world, and then step back into their own world and maybe make more use of it, ask sharper questions, be more in control of their lives, be more in control of what they think.

Ginger: Did I read that you're not really a novel-reader yourself?

Karen: I do not read novels. There are two reasons: Even if I liked reading novels, I wouldn't read them, because I have to keep a very clear line between the creative and the consumptive process. I also hate reading novels. I have never liked reading. I blame my school for that.

I say that not even in a jokey way. I think English is taught appallingly badly. I get mail every day from kids (I say 'kids;' they're probably about 17 or 18, but that's a kid, at my age), and they say, 'I was turned off of reading at school, and now I'm getting back into books by reading your stuff.' And it breaks my heart; because they're forced to read things they don't want to read.

I get occasional emails from teachers (when we say 'teachers' in the UK, we mean people who teach children, not college students; but I also get them from what you would call American 'teachers' who teach college students), and they're so convinced they know what the writer thinks: 'I have told my class that these are your beliefs, *x*, *y*, and *z*.'

And I email back and say, 'Well, if you just ask me: one, I'd tell you my beliefs; but secondly, they don't influence my book; and thirdly, you are wrong, that is not what I believe.' And I wonder how many kids are just totally turned off of reading by this very top-down way of just saying, 'This is a book, this is what you're going to think of it.'

I think you've got to leave kids to explore. I don't think the written word is sacred. I mean history tells us it's not sacred, because many civilizations didn't have the written word and did perfectly well, culturally and spiritually. So, I know it sounds odd for a novel-reader to say words aren't sacred, but they're not; they're just an output that enables you to see into someone else's mind. And you can do that through many media.

Now, I don't play games, either; although I love games—I really love games. It's about this business of how you engage with it. When I see something as a game or a book, then I'm seeing it as a customer and I can't get into that writer state of mind—the storyteller state of mind—that says I have to be someone else. There's a sort of meta thing going on there.

Again, this was a subject of the [blog](#) today, because I have had so many questions since the game came out, about: 'How do you deal with characters?' 'How do you deal with this?' 'Why don't you play games?' I've explained very carefully, bit by bit, that I have to be able to go into this waking nightmare dream state, and then feel it as the characters feel it. Because if I feel it as a gamer, there are things you see in a game, and do, that in real life would upset you terribly—would be really heartbreaking—but in a game, you can just step back a couple of stages, and you've either killed that person or you haven't.

Ginger: Can I interrupt you there? One of the things that comes through in *Gears of War* is the horror of war—obviously. And, as you just said, when you're playing a game, you do all this stuff: even if you kill grubs, you don't really pay much attention to what happens to the other characters; because in *Gears of War*, mostly the squad doesn't get killed. But there are a lot of deaths in the book, but you don't really notice it so much when you're playing a game. Do you want a gamer who comes to the books to start thinking about the world differently; or is that just a side effect?

Karen: I'll be very cautious about what I say, because it doesn't sound as if you've played the third game yet. That's where it all changes. I wrote the third game, and it is very much like the novels: a lot of people do not come out of the end of the game. And the reaction from the gamers has been quite surprising; because they are fully invested in the story.

They don't see it as a separate thing now. We integrated it so fully into the game —pulled all the novel storylines together, pulled the storylines from [Game 1](#) and [2](#) together—and there are real emotional stakes. Some of their favorite characters are not going to make it to the end. And it is not a happy ending. It might be a vaguely hopeful one, but it is not a happy ending.

Ginger: I've only finished the first act, because I don't have very much time for playing. But I have to tell you that when I got to the end of [Book 4](#)—I didn't play the second game, I played the first game—I was like, *I've got to find out what's going to happen next; so, I'm going to play this game.* And so, I'm playing it under 'very, very easy;' but I don't have very much time to play games, so I haven't gotten very far. So, yes, I'm doing it for your story. In fact, I think if I hadn't read that you wrote the story for the third game, I probably wouldn't have even bought it.

Karen: It's really nice to know that. I think it's worth saying at this stage that one of the reasons Epic brought me on board was they specifically wanted the novels to inform the game. A lot of IPs will look at novels as something they have to do, basically to sell the license to make a bit more money; and they don't want it interfering with their main product, be that a movie, a game, or whatever. You know that's pretty well the place I was with [Star Wars](#); basically a sort of sidebar to it. Epic is not like that; Epic wanted all their tie-in fiction—which included comics and novels—to be part of the main storyline.

One of the things I was originally also brought in to do for them was be a story consultant. And they wanted this to be as realistic as they could make it. Now, clearly we're not talking hard science in this; but the bits that are hard science are actually so minor as part of the story. This is not basically a ray-guns and technology story. The technology in *Gears* is 1970s, 1980s; we kept it at that level.

There were various gameplay reasons for doing that. But Epic wanted the books to help the gamer understand the game better. And what you see in Game 3 is really the sort of fruition of that philosophy; that they have this transmedia product, but it pulls it all together, and then you get the experience that you get in all three media within the game, and it becomes a much more character-driven thing.

Ginger: Yes, I can definitely see the difference between the first game and the third game in that regard, even though I haven't gotten very far into it.

For the sake, again, of the people that are new to the story, let's get back to some of the stuff about the story. The main characters you started out with, did you actually create any new characters?

Karen: Yes, there are quite a few new characters. Again, this is a pragmatic thing.

We have the main squad. And people say that the main squad—which is [Marcus Fenix](#), [Dom Santiago](#), [Damon Baird](#), and [Augustus Cole](#)—are sort of one-dimensional in the first game. I don't agree with that, because when I looked at the cinematics from that before I started writing, Dom, for example, turns to Marcus during one cinematic: They're walking through town; they're looking for a vehicle, or somewhere to fuel. Marcus turns to Dom, and says something like, 'I hope you know where you're going; we're getting lost.'

And Dom turns around, and says, 'I won't let you down.' He doesn't say, 'I'm not lost,' or, 'Hey, don't worry;' he says, 'I won't let you down.' That's Dom in a nutshell. Dom is dog-loyal, watching his back, thinking and breathing for him. And it's those little touches: although they hadn't fleshed out those characters very much, they gave me an incredible foundation to build on.

And exploring Marcus Fenix, the one character whose mind I'm not allowed to look into (that was the one stricture they gave me: not allowed to touch Marcus from that angle; I've got to walk around him from the outside), initially I thought, *Oh, my God, I do tight third person POV; how am I going to deal with Marcus?* And then, being forced to go down, out of my comfort zone, gave me a whole new window on writing characters, yet again.

And that was to see Marcus through all these different characters. And he's a different person to everybody. But after four years I'm now starting to see why Marcus does some of the things he does—in the same way that you would if he was a real person who was quite hard to get to know—and that makes for a much more vivid fiction process, because I'm actually experiencing that.

Now, of course they had a limited cast; deliberately so, because they're focusing on individual soldiers: not the big battle scenes, but war the way you see it, which is a couple of blokes looking out for each other. You don't see the big picture. Even the people in command don't see the big picture for years. But you're worrying about the guy next to you; you're looking after your mates. And it very much captured that sort of squad feeling.

When we got to the book, it started out with [Aspho Fields](#). And I said, 'So, what's Aspho Fields?' They said, 'Well, we just know that's where he got his reputation and was a hero; you tell us what happened at Aspho Fields. Oh, and such-and-such a character dies—basically, Dom's brother. We don't know how; that's your job. You fill in all that.' So, I did *Aspho Fields*, and we needed some characters, really for a device to enable that backstory to be told. Because this is going back to the previous war.; there's a lot of water under the bridge.

And one of the things that is a challenge in writing books is the exposition—the 'info dump,' as we call it in the trade. It can be done appallingly badly, as it often is, with the, 'As you know, professor...' line (and some people still do that), or it

can be an integral part of what makes the story tick. In this case, I thought they needed somebody from the past to come up and just dredge up all the old painful memories that Dom doesn't know about but Marcus does.

Ginger: That's where [Bernie](#) comes in.

Karen: That is where Bernie comes in. I thought, *Well, there's got to be somebody who's a lot older, because they'll have to remember the [Pendulum Wars](#). And it's always good to have a sergeant character, because they will have had an overview of the close-quarter stuff in the actual battle. And they're a bit short on women. This is a society that actually has women in the frontline; make it an old woman sergeant—because nobody does that; I don't think there's another old woman sergeant around.*

And that's how Bernie was born. It's an illustration, really, of how stories then start to create themselves because of the extrapolative process that I do. I always say to people I'm not an imaginative person; I look at the nuts and bolts I've got, and I extrapolate from them. I can extrapolate a long way very fast; but basically, to me, stories tell themselves, and they're a finding-out process, a reporting process.

So, we've got the organization that used to be the global power—the superpower—the [Coalition of Ordered Governments](#). It's almost colonial in the British or American sense—that it has global influence, and it has these territories. So, I looked at some of the concept art, and we've got a character already in the concept art called [Tai Kaliso](#), who's a tattooed Samoan type of character, and I think instantly the character that we're going to have for the woman sergeant will be maybe almost like a Maori—part white, part Maori. So, that's how Bernie Mataki was born. Somehow I instantly get a picture of her, because I know her age, I know what she's been through, I know the sort of territory she's come from.

And I do actually use a sort of geological thing here. I literally extrapolate from the planet. Now, apart from knowing that there are areas of granite that the Locusts can't tunnel through to reach the surface, and that there are a lot of land masses, we have no map of [Sera](#) (which is the planet) at all; we just literally make it up as we go along. But then I start looking at where the granite is, where these creatures can get, whether there are fishes; those drive a lot of the story. You will see that particularly in the book, [Anvil Gate](#).

So, although it's not hard science, a lot of science drives it, because that's the only way I can think. I'm not a fantasy writer. Things have got to come from the real world for me; because I will spend maybe a day, perhaps, researching things like closed brain injury, for one or two lines in a book. It's got to come from somewhere for me, even if I then go through the fiction process and completely change it. I suppose the only way to describe it is everything's got to have some verisimilitude to carry it through.

So, then we've got Bernie; and then I find, well, I need other characters. If the Coalition has been fighting an 80-year war with the [Union of Independent Republics](#), what happened to all those people? Where are they? You know they don't suddenly get wiped off the face of the planet; although many, many millions of people have been, there will still be some of them around. So, then we get the [Gorasnayans](#), who never ever signed the [Armistice](#), and as far as they're concerned they're still at war with the UIR. But they're only about a few thousand people now. So, then you get all the characters like [Miran Trescu](#).

And then what happened to the [COG Navy](#)? Well, we don't see much of the Navy in the games—or we don't until the third game—but they must have ships somewhere, so who's actually manning those now? What are they doing? And then we come up with [Captain Michaelson](#). So, I created a lot of new characters, but they all fitted perfectly with the existing characters which I was developing for Epic—fleshing them out more and more.

I never create more characters than I absolutely need to tell the story. Colleagues say to me, from other franchises, that they like to create a character to leave their mark on their IP. I'm not about that; I don't need to leave my mark anywhere—or want to leave a mark. So, I'm not a fan of anything, in the sense that they are. I create what I need to tell the story. That means creating the best possible characters I possibly can, who are most fitted to the environment they're in, and then just watching what they do with the other characters.

[music]

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If you aren't already a member of Audible, you can download the first *Gears of War* novel, *Aspho Fields*, for free, by going to [audiblepodcast.com/booksandideas](#).

[music]

Ginger: Can you talk a little bit about [Colonel Hoffman](#)? Because, obviously, at the beginning of the first game, he seems like not a very good guy; yet an awful lot of the novels are told from his point of view. Could you talk a little bit about him?

Karen: Yes, Hoffman is a really excellent character for a novelist like me. He's in the game. He doesn't have much of a backstory. He's really one of these ciphers—rather like [Anya](#). The Anya character has got to be there to instruct the player to do things; but she can be a lot more than that. And, as you see in the book, she does become a lot more than that.

The thing about Hoffman is that you know there's some bad feeling between him and Marcus, and you know there's been this whole incident about the court-martial (which we're going to take five books and three games to get to). But the thing about Hoffman is you look at him and think, *Why does he do what he does?* I don't do heroes and I don't do villains, I just do people; which means my 'hero' characters—for want of a better word—will have some very nasty bits to them and some very ordinary bits to them, and the villains will be understandable and will have some good qualities. Because that's what real human beings are; they're a mixed bag.

I can't do this black-and-white kind of fiction that some IPs like, with superheroes and super villains. It's just not the way I'm wired. I can't think of human beings in those terms, even in fiction—especially not in fiction, because in a lot of ways they've got to be more real and more nuanced for you to be able to write about them; because you've got to distill them down to this fictional version, which means that you've got to know them incredibly well to be able to boil it down to those salient points.

And you say, *Well, why does Hoffman do the things he's got to do?* And sometimes you can pick up on things that are utterly random in the game-making process; for example, the voice. Now, I actually didn't ask them why they picked the voice they did for Hoffman, which is very Southern, and not officer class for someone who's British; but he's a colonel, and he appears to be the highest ranking officer.

To me, with my background and where I come from in the world, and my class background and my knowledge of the Army, I've instantly got a totally different picture of Hoffman, perhaps, from the one that Epic had—and they were happy to let me run with it—which is: Here we've got this working-class guy who's been promoted through the ranks. What sort of pressure is he going to be under? Why

is a colonel the highest ranking officer they've got? Now, all those are massive springboards.

And then you look at this guy and think, OK, so he started out as a sergeant (well, I say 'started out;' he works up through being a sort of senior NCO) and then he ends up being colonel. When we were discussing it, there was a possibility, say perhaps he's frightened of things going wrong on his watch. I said, 'This is the classic working-class fear of failure when you move into the middle classes.' I mean that's something I've come from, and a lot of my colleagues have come from, is that you always think you're going to be found out.

So, in a way there's Hoffman thinking he's going to be found out. But he's constantly dealing with something where he feels out of his depth. He's basically a war fighter. He's a basic ordinary soldier who's suddenly got this gold braid, and really wishes he didn't have it, but he's determined to do his duty. The ball is in his court; human beings are not going to go extinct on his watch. It's that simple.

So, then you start to flesh him out, and one thing just leads to another, and you leapfrog through it. And at the end you come up with a very tormented guy, who's had a hard life, and had to make some rough decisions; who doesn't like Prescott—doesn't like the guy he's got to work with; doesn't know why.

Because Prescott actually doesn't do anything wrong; he just doesn't tell him things. Which is what politicians do; it's the 'need-to-know' thing. But it's only right at the end—even after the end of the third game; even, I think, after the fifth book comes out—it's not until the comics you will see what Prescott knew and when he knew it, and why he felt obliged to do what he did.

I'm not saying he's a good guy, or a loveable guy, because we don't have good guys and bad guys. You will find that fans feel passionately and very differently

about each character. We've got Hoffman fans, we've got [Dizzy](#) fans, we've got Bernie fans; we've got people who can't stand Dom (even though it's hard to dislike Dom, there are people who dislike Dom, for all sorts of reasons). These operate like real people for them, because we've worked very hard on making them fully realized, and letting the characters drive it.

And then you've got Fenix; I mean that's a classic one. I'm just fascinated from the view of the scientists and engineers, how they see someone like [Adam Fenix](#), who used to be a soldier and did effectively his national service, and then came back out to be the director of research in one of their weapons think tanks; and the things he's done, and the way he reacts, and the choices he makes.

A lot of this now will come out in the fifth book, which is [The Slab](#), which is out next May. It will explore the problems that he has: what does he do; what does he hand over to the government; what does he tell them, what does he think he needs to keep to himself; what happens with the things that he creates; what gets done in his name?

And there's a whole fascinating moral thing there, which is much more complex than it is for Hoffman. Hoffman either lives or dies. Hoffman has this sense of, *Either I keep as many people alive as possible or I don't; either I get shot tomorrow or I don't*. He doesn't have time for all the luxury of thinking this through.

Although you start to see in [Coalition's End](#) that he has this thrust on him, and he has to do these thinking things, which he thinks are Prescott's job, but there's no more Prescott. Prescott's gone; and he's stuck there thinking, *Do I have the right to make these decisions? What is the role of the Army in a civilian society?* People say, 'Oh, *Gears of War*, just frat boys in space.' No. You really start to pull this apart, you've got every single issue facing us today.

Ginger: Well, that's why I started to ask you earlier about the fact that you don't read novels. Because I don't read very much fiction, but I like science fiction, because it allows writers to do just what you've done with this story; which is look at the real issues of today in a different world. Which makes people more open to actually looking at the questions; whereas, if you tried to write about the same issues in the context of a current war, people would be so polarized by their points of view.

Karen: Exactly! But they're also blinded by what they know.

Ginger: Or think they know!

Karen: Or think they know; absolutely. Yes. Well, that's the other thing: nobody ever has the full picture—nobody. The fog of war is a real thing, both on the battlefield and also in historical context. The thing is if you make something that's firmly set in the real world, people are looking for the real-world things, and saying, 'But that's the wrong color; and that person wasn't called that.'

If you take it out of that context completely, then you just strip away all those distractions, and you say, 'Look at the underlying causes, look at the underlying questions.' And then you can really push the envelope. I have known science fiction editors say to writers, 'That wouldn't happen,' and then it's gone and happened in the real world; because the science fiction writer actually does say, 'Yes, let's push the boundaries.' That's the great thing about science fiction.

I don't actually see *Gears* as science fiction; I actually see it as a horror story—an earth military horror story—because there are so few gizmos in it. They were very good about that. [Cliff Bleszinski](#), who's the Design Director—the father of the [chainsaw rifle](#)—he just thought, *That's a cool weapon!* He didn't get caught up in any complicated things.

And you look at a chainsaw rifle, you look at the [Lancer](#): when I first started on *Gears*, my immediate reaction was, ‘Can we just talk about how they actually clean that?’ And they just laughed. They said, ‘No one’s ever asked that question before.’ Because my first thought was, *You’ve got a chainsaw, you’re going to cut through flesh, connective tissue; you’re going to have to be cleaning that puppy every day.* Surgeons will tell you that when they use power tools, this all gets gunked up; any woman who’s minced meat in the kitchen in a grinder, it is a mess.

And suddenly that then becomes part of the story. But in a good way; not the obsession about the power outputs, and the ‘unladen weight of the African swallow’—to use a Monty Python phrase. It is really about the color of it; it’s about the reality of what it is to actually have to fight a war like that—which struck me as far more rooted in this war, or the previous one, rather than any futuristic thing.

Ginger: Can we talk a little bit about the style of the way the books are organized? I really love the style of the two threads, where we’re getting backstory and the current story is moving forward—those two things are happening in parallel. Obviously, in *Aspho Fields* the goal was to tell us the backstory of the main characters; but now, as we’re moving forward, we’re learning more and more. And I’m glad to hear that in the fifth book we’re going to learn more about Adam Fenix, since he just appears only slightly in the other ones.

When you’re writing that, is that difficult? Do you write them separately? How does that happen?

Karen: It’s an interesting process. I hadn’t done flashbacks before. In previous books, when I did flashbacks they were always characters thinking about things, and memories would come and smack them upside the head. But in terms of

having a parallel timeline, that came out of a random conversation with [Rod Fergusson](#), who at the time was the Executive Producer on *Gears*; and he's sort of the head of practically everything now.

Rod and I were sort of spit-balling it, as we often did; and I said, 'Well, OK, if I want to do *Aspho Fields*, but we want to tie in to the end of that particular game, I've got a timeline issue here.' And he said, 'Well, we don't mind if you do flashbacks.' Because we were working at how many books we were going to do, and how we were going to fit the story in. Because we already knew the main story arc—*X does Y*, that happens, that happens, that happens, and at the end that happens—but we didn't know how.

They were very clear they were going to do this over a three-game story arc. So, I had some goals that I could hit; which was great for me, because it meant I could plan how much meat was in each book. So, I'm thinking, *That's an awfully long time scale*. And he said, 'No, no; we don't mind you doing flashbacks.' And I thought, *I know; I'm going to do a parallel timeline. I'm going to risk that, for the first time ever*.

So, I started writing it. And I actually wrote it in serial order. I basically did it in a linear way—because I'm a visual thinker, not a verbal thinker. I know that people say, 'Oh, but you write.' And I say, 'Yes, I know, but that's an output; my input is visual.' I'm seeing this in my head.

And I'm seeing it almost in a cinematic sort of sense, that when this happens, that triggers that memory in that character's head, and then we jump back to that world. And then, effectively their past plays out. And then when we cut back in, it's at that point where, if that character knew what was going to happen to them at that point in the future, bang, we would back in the present day.

But I found it incredibly useful; and I thought, *I'm going to do that for the whole lot* (except for Book 5, which we didn't really plan till later in the day, because we changed publishers; so, you never really know just how many you've got running ahead of you). But certainly for the books that were going to be the story that didn't take part in the game, but was the game (if you see what I mean—the continuation), I thought, *I'm going to do that throughout, because we need to see how the decisions in the past have made the people what they are today.*

We need to see where those decisions come from. We know why Marcus behaves the way he does. We know why Dom behaves the way he does. We see what drives Hoffman. We see a bit of what drives Prescott (although not until the end). We understand how the world has come to the state it's been in.

That's the other thing—the faded grandeur, the destroyed beauty sort of vibe that *Gears* started out with; what makes it so massively powerful. When you look at the art, and you look at the cinematics, and you look at that world, you want to go into it; you want to open the doors, you want to look under the rubble, you want to try and put those statues back on their feet.

There are virtually no other games that I can feel that about. It basically says, *This is a real world; there are things going on off-screen that you can't possibly know about, but if you step through here, you'll be able to see them.* And I wanted to get that sense of how does a world reach this stage.

There was one absolutely superb line—which I don't think Epic realized just how brilliant it was, until I nagged them to death about, 'We have to keep using it!' Way back, before 2006, before the game came out, they did all sorts of promos that, because they produce stuff so effortlessly and brilliantly, they sort of forget about the past little flashes of genius. And I said, 'You've got a line that we've got to keep using.' It was from a very old promo, and it was, "Understand what a

world had to do to survive.” That just put the hairs on the back of my neck up. I thought, *Ah, that’s it!*

So, you do understand what that world had to do to survive. You watch the decline. You watch everything fall apart. You watch the infrastructure fall apart. Because one of the things that immediately when I’m watching *Gears*, I’m looking at them just spraying ammo in the game, and I say, ‘Who’s making this? Where’s this stuff coming from? Where’s the industrial base gone?’ And you see that in the books—that they haven’t got it, basically. So, Marcus is always yelling at them not to waste ammo. And that’s what would really happen.

And the food production—how do you feed that number of people? I initially sat down with all the UN refugee stuff on the number of calories required, and what you needed to do to move into a devastated area to set up a refugee camp. I was looking at stuff from World War II about their sort of calorie allowance in rationing. I planned it down to that level. And the really lovely thing about Epic was, even though they’re not obsessed with detail, they would join in with that—although we never showed it publicly.

Most people would enjoy an IP for the sheer majesty of the story, and the experience, and all that sort of stuff; but you do get a proportion who just want to sit there and count numbers, and crunch things, and get into the tiny detail. That just becomes quite counterproductive. So, we had to know that the things worked, but we didn’t share that with the broader audience. 99.9% are very happy with that, and just accept it as is, and it just feels real to them. The difference is we know why it’s real, because we’ve done the homework

Ginger: For people who might be coming to the books, that don’t play videogames and probably aren’t going to suddenly start playing videogames, when the next novel comes out, will they be able to figure out what happened in

between? Because, obviously, Game 3 just is like a continuation of the fourth book. I'm sure you must have readers that aren't gamers.

Karen: Many; yes. There are two ways of tackling this. Certainly with the fifth book, none of the storyline deals with what happens, in event terms, during the third game or after, but it does tell you why things happened the way they did. You do see the decisions and the events that you see actually happen in the third game, and you go, 'Oh, that's what happened.'

Now, bearing in mind that people read things out of order, and bearing in mind that we live in a world of spoilers, what we've done for the last two books: I said to my editor at [Simon and Schuster](#) (who were the new publishers for it), 'I just can't keep doing this as backstory. Why don't we just put a timeline in the front?' And that's it. I did the [complete guide](#) to *Gears of War*, effectively—which is now on the *Gears* website—for gamers getting into it.

But for the fifth book, we obviously take it a bit further, and I've added on the events of the third game. So, what you can do is basically read that timeline through. It's all spoilers; but the thing is, this is a flashback. So, this is the order you're supposed to read it in: you're supposed to start 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and fit the games and the comics in around it. The fifth book only makes sense, really, in the context of knowing how the game finished, even though it's set five, six, seven years earlier. So, yes, we're trying to fill in the gaps; though, obviously, you won't get the richness with this—which was one of the fabulous things about the third game.

And if you're not a gamer, I'd say just go and look on YouTube, and look at the cinematics. You won't get all the story from the cinematics, because one of the things I was very careful to try and do was to make sure a lot of the story was in the gameplay. Because one of the things you do get with games, sometimes, is

that all the story is in the cinematics, and the gameplay doesn't touch it, so that people skip the cinematics and they just play the game.

What you're aiming for with a blockbuster game like *Gears* is to tell the story in every single fragment of it: that you tell it in the cinematics; that you tell it in the gameplay sequences; that you even tell it in the chatter—the sort of random lines when you shoot someone. You tell it in the environment—what's on the walls, what they see, what their clothes look like; that sort of thing.

So, even going through the cinematics, you won't get all the full subtlety of the story there. I'm sorry to say that. I know that sounds awfully... It's almost like, 'You've got to buy the game, and you've got to play it.' But I've tried to meet the non-gaming *Gears* fan halfway, and have the little summaries at the front.

Ginger: Well, I actually really am looking forward to playing the rest of the game. I've played enough of it to know that they finally made 'Easy' easy enough that I can actually do something besides duck and cover.

Karen: Yes. I feel frustrated, in a way. I've got the Xbox sitting here, and the game, and I can't play it. I can't play it until the day I know I'm done with *Gears* for good, because it will corrupt my experience of it. I can't tell you how heartbreaking that is. It really is!

Ginger: And then, next you're doing [Halo](#).

Karen: Yes, I'm doing *Halo*.

Ginger: And I have to say that, because I have to put out another [Brain Science Podcast](#) before I'll be able to edit this, by the time I actually release this, your new *Halo* book will probably be out—because doesn't that come out on October 25th?

Karen: This is the situation with *Halo*: I'm writing three books for them. I'm not involved with the game; although they say what I do feeds into the game, and there may be, shall we say, some overlap. But I'm not physically writing the game for them. There will be two books that will lead up to *Halo 4*, the game.

[Glasslands](#) is the first one. And then there'll be a second one—the title isn't public for that, but basically that's the bridge between the end of *Halo 3* and the beginning of *Halo 4*.

A lot of the events will be touched on. Some characters from the previous game, that *Halo* fans know, will be in there—like [Catherine Halsey](#) and [Chief Mendez](#)—although I've reinterpreted them in my own Traviss way. Because I looked at Catherine Halsey, and I thought, *Oh, scientists with ethical problems; yes, please, I'll have some of that*. And Mendez; his reaction to it: I thought, *Ah, hoary old Chief who used to train Special Forces; yes, I think I know this character*.

But there were also a lot of new characters in it. And I'm happier doing a sort of sidebar thing to that—to really look at what the characters like the [ODSTs](#) get up to, and what it really means to be a [SPARTAN](#). Because, having the journalistic mindset that I've got, my questions are: *Do they really live in their armor all the time? Is it a comfort blanket? And what about urine?*—I mean all sorts of things. And we explore that, no holds barred.

And you look at the SPARTANS. I mean I actually have got a SPARTAN character in it; but, as I say, I don't do superheroes. And I'm thinking, *This is a forty-one-year-old who was kidnapped as a child; subjected to the most appalling things: What are they going to be like at forty-one? How are their normal human counterparts going to look at them?* And that's really what I'm looking at.

Ginger: I have read a few of the other [Halo](#) novels, and I like [Eric Nylund's](#) books the best. So, there's been a little bit of looking at what it would be like, as far as how the other people look at you; but there's obviously a lot of good room there.

So, you've written the one *Halo* book, but right now you're concentrating on finishing the last book for *Gears of War*?

Karen: I'm doing Book 5 for *Gears of War*, at the moment—which is *The Slab*—then I'm doing my own copyright stuff again, which is [Privateers](#), published by Simon and Schuster. That's the working title at the moment; it'll be '*Privateers*' and something else in the title, because it's a series.

And that's about private military contractors on earth. It's a much more real-world thing—although a little bit of a fantastic element; a little bit of a speculative element. But it's basically about mercenaries. And it's a different view of mercenaries, too. Some of my best friends are mercenaries, and it's not quite the way the media portray it. So, I'm just hoping to shed a bit of light, in a sort of nonpartisan way.

Then it's back to the second *Halo* book. And then... I'm not in a position to talk about what I'm doing after that; but let's just say I'm going to be very, very busy.

Ginger: Well, I certainly have enjoyed talking with you Karen, and I look forward to next month when your first *Halo* novel comes out.

Karen: I'm not sure how *Halo* fans are going to take it, because it's not really what they've been used to with *Halo*. On the other hand, if they've read my *Gears* stuff, and my [Wess'hal Wars](#) stuff, even my [Republic Commando](#) stuff, I think they know exactly what they're going to get. Because I always give the same reader experience; because I can only engage with the fictional world in one way—that's all I know how to do—which is to get into the characters.

Ginger: I love character-driven stories; so, that's why I'm a fan of your work. And so, it's been great getting to talk to you.

Karen: Thank you. And it's been a pleasure talking to you, Ginger.

[music]

I really appreciate [Karen Traviss](#) coming on *Books and Ideas* and talking to me about her writing. The only downside of the way I did this interview was, because I knew that many of you would be unfamiliar with the *Gears of War* world, I couldn't ask her a lot of questions that I really wanted to ask, because they were too, what we in America call '[inside baseball](#).' But, even so, I really learned a lot from this interview.

I have finally finished the game, and I have to say that these books and this interview really enriched my experience of the game. So, if you are a fan of *Gears of War*, but you haven't checked out these novels, I encourage you to do so; even if you know how the story ends. The novels will really enrich your appreciation for the characters, and enrich, I think, the game experience.

If you are a *Gears of War* fan, I would love to hear from you. Remember that my gamer tag on Xbox LIVE is [DocARTEMIS](#); or you can send me email at docartemis@gmail.com. I would really like to play some multiplayer—especially the horde mode. And I'd love to play with somebody who would be willing to teach me the ropes, so that I could become a good team player.

Of course, if you aren't a gamer, I would like to encourage you to read the first book of the series, which is called, [Aspho Fields](#). The story is definitely one that stands alone, and that you can enjoy without ever playing or even watching the game.

Now, moving on to the future, I don't know yet what the next episode of [Books and Ideas](#) is going to be. I am going to try to put something out before the end of the year. And I'm considering perhaps changing the format slightly, to something shorter—perhaps mini book reviews, or something like that. So, if you have any opinions about that, again, you can send them to me at docartemis@gmail.com.

If you are a new listener, I'd like to remind you that I have detailed show notes at booksandideas.com, including episode transcripts. And one thing I want to say about the show notes for today's episode: I am embedding the video that she talks about—the trailer with the “Mad World” theme—so that if you are totally new to this, and you'd like to see that video without being faced with all the spoiler videos that are currently on YouTube, you can just go to [Books and Ideas](#), or virginiacampbellmd.com to watch that trailer. It's only a minute. If you haven't seen that trailer, you really should see it.

Another interesting thing that I have in the show notes is I will include a link to an old book review I wrote. Five or more years ago, before I even started podcasting, I wrote a [very short review](#) of one of her *Star Wars* books, called [Republican Commando: Hard Contact](#). So, that's why, actually, I was attracted to these books—not because I was particularly a fan of *Gears of War*, but because I knew that her writing was very good in the character writing department; which, for me, is the key to fiction, since I'm not that big of a fiction reader.

Of course, I hope that you listen to my other podcast, the [Brain Science Podcast](#); and join the [Books and Ideas Fan page](#) at Facebook.

Thanks again for listening. I look forward to talking with you again very soon.

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