

English Literature or Economics?

Interviewer

This was an experience as itâ€™s described in the book, and as youâ€™ve described it here, of intense living filled with a series of horrible images that would haunt anyone I would think going forward.

Interviewer

Describe what itâ€™s like to have gone through combat, killed, had your own life in jeopardy, led other men through dark circumstances, and what it does to the brain.

Karl Marlantes

And what it does to the heart and soul. Youâ€™re raised basically in our country Judeo-Christian ethosâ€”â€œthou shalt not kill.â€ And you end up doing precisely that. You have to deal with that one.

Karl Marlantes

What it does to the brain is that it alters it physically. And people need to be aware of this. Thereâ€™s this truism that if you see at what point in a tour a guy is killed or wounded, itâ€™s way toward the beginning, not the end. And the reason for this, my view is, that itâ€™s and itâ€™s proven out pretty much by what weâ€™ve learned about the brain in just the last decade, is that your brain actually alters in order to handle combat.

Interviewer

Karl Marlantes

Itâ€™s a novel and itâ€™s set in the mountains of far northwestern South Vietnam, right where the demilitarized zone hits the Laotian border. Itâ€™s set in the first three months of 1969, and itâ€™s a story of a marine rifle company that isâ€” opens up a firebase called Matterhorn. Theyâ€™re ordered off of it. Itâ€™s be[en] through some mistakes occupied by the North Vietnamese Army, and they end up re-assaulting their own bunkers. And itâ€™s a story of a young man whoâ€™sâ€” basically his task is to learn compassion in a very difficult situation.

Interviewer

And that in a nutshell describes your own personal experience, is that right, in Vietnam as a Marine officer?

Karl Marlantes

Yes, itâ€™s very close to that. I mean I did assault a hill that was actually bunkers that had been made previously by Marines that were occupied by the North Vietnamese. A place called Hill 484. And yeah, and I spent a lot of time out in the bush, in the mountains of what they call the Annamese Cordillera. Probably four thousand feet up, five thousandâ€” monsoons. No, it wasâ€” I often joke with people. I say it was like being in one of the most beautiful national parks in the world with the rangers shooting at you.

Interviewer

Tell me a little bit about your beginnings. Youâ€™re from the northwest, from Oregon state. Tell me about where you come from.

Karl Marlantes

I grew up in a small town—Seaside, Oregon, which in those days was a logging town most of the year; but in the two months of Oregon summer, people from Portland would come down and it had beach houses there. But the primary function was logging and it was a fishing community. Right south of the Columbia River.

Interviewer

And was your father involved in the logging industry?

Karl Marlantes

No, my father was a high school teacher. Everybody else in my family were loggers or fisherman. I actually worked for my grandfather who was a salmon fisherman, and used to complain mightily because my friends were working in restaurants and I was out in the cold and the dark in the middle of the night. Now I look back on it, what kid wouldn't have loved to have fished with his grandfather for a living? But that was my community. My own father was a high school teacher.

Interviewer

What did he teach? What was his subject?

Karl Marlantes

He taught—my high school was small. He taught commercial law, geography, history, and algebra.

Interviewer

Commercial law in high school?

Karl Marlantes

Yes, yeah. Because high school back in the late '50s, early '60s was the end for the majority of kids. So they were teaching them how to do business.

Interviewer

When did you get your love for reading?

Karl Marlantes

That came really early and it's actually—I think I was kind of conned by my father. We had a little library in Seaside, and Mrs. Witty owned—was the librarian. It was in the same place where they put the volunteer fire department's truck. And several shelves of the library.

Karl Marlantes

And my father—I'd say when can I get a library card? Well, you're not old enough yet. It's too big a responsibility. You know a few months go by—dad you know I can read now. When can I get a—oh you're not ready yet. I don't think it's—too big. And finally I don't know I was probably about eight, he had it set up with Mrs. Witty—walked me into the library and she's there at the desk. And

sheâ€™s got the worldâ€™s largest library card. Itâ€™s like about this big and sheâ€™d put sort of filigree on the edge of it and everything, and very serious ceremony. My fatherâ€™s standing behind me with his arm on my shoulder, and she hands me this giant library card, and Iâ€™m just thrilled to death. [Laughter]

Karl Marlantes

And then about three months later my brother, my older brother, says whatâ€™s that and I say thatâ€™s my library card. He says thatâ€™s weird, hereâ€™s mine! [Laughter] But my father just encouraged reading, you know. So thatâ€™s where it came from.

Interviewer

Did you know early on you wanted to be a writer?

Karl Marlantes

I started writing early, yeah. I started writing in a diary as soon as I learned how to write. And it was one of my first encounters with death. Actually I had been writing day to day sort ofâ€”and in the summer I read what I did on New Yearâ€™s Day. And it wasâ€”went down to the mill pond. I saw some ducks and then I watched a water snake slip into the water. And it hit me just like a hammer, Iâ€™ll never do that again. Thatâ€™s gone. Oh my God!

Karl Marlantes

And I took my diary and I had all my dreams in it as wellâ€”and I ran out in the backyard and threw it in the burning barrel and burned it. My first book burning I participated in.

Karl Marlantes

And then I wrote a novel with my cousin, a novel, when we were nine, about space invaders, you know, terrorizing the earth. And the earth was saved by two nine year old boys oddly enough. But thatâ€™s lost. I donâ€™t know where it is. I wrote through high school and then I wrote at Yale. I won the Tunic prize for literature for short story writing. So Iâ€™ve been sort of at it for a long time.

Interviewer

Did you think you would become a professional writer?

Karl Marlantes

Never thoughtâ€”I mean I sort of dreamed someday that I would do that, but when I was in college it was pretty clear that that was a pretty dicey operation in terms of earning a living. I can remember the day that I was sitting there trying to decide whether to do English literature or Economics. I remember the night. And I said English literature, the only thing I can do with that is teach in colleges and I didnâ€™t want to do that. So I chose Economics so that I could earn a living.

Karl Marlantes

And that was a bigâ€”one of those what they call T junctions in your life? And so I went down that path. And, you know, went into business and wrote evenings and weekends in between consulting jobs.

Interviewer

You went to Yale. Class of what?

Karl Marlantes

â€™67.

I Want to Be a Marine Like That
Interviewer

â€™67. And then you enlisted in the Marine Corps after that?

Karl Marlantes

No, I actuallyâ”well it was sort of a simultaneous thing. There was a program called the Platoon Leaders Class, PLC, and what you would do is you would sign up for that and then you would go to the equivalent of boot camp at Quantico. And you know if you were one of the chosen ones and survived that, then you got to go to college, accumulating seniority but no pay.

Karl Marlantes

And then you would go back in the summer again and at the end of your college career you owed the Marine Corps three years. But you didnâ”t have to go to OCS or certainly didnâ”t have to do an ROTC. They went directly to the basic school. So I had signed up freshman year, I think it was anyway, in the PLC program.

Interviewer

So thisâ”you were probably unusual from your Yale class in doing this, am I right?

Karl Marlantes

Very. I think there probably were three or four that were in the Marine Corps out of the whole school, I donâ”t think just my class. Those days it was the beginning of a sort of disdain for people that went into the military. Itâ”s like youâ”re either some damned fool or you know, a fascist. I mean this is the 1960s and there was an awful lot of politicizing of decisions like this, which didnâ”t happen even three or four years earlier.

Interviewer

So I canâ”t imagine you thought of yourself as either one.

Karl Marlantes

No. I didnâ”t.

Interviewer

So what inspired you to want to join the Marine Corps at such a young age?

Karl Marlantes

Well, first of all, in this little town of mine, I would guess that almost every adult male I knew had served in World War II. If not, then they were logging and they were exempt because it was considered a war industry.

Interviewer

Was your father in World War II?

Karl Marlantes

Yes. My father was with Patton's Third Army and he was, you know, landed at Omaha Beach, not on the first, not Omaha. It was the other one, Utah Beach, not on the first day. He came about a week or two later or something like that, and eventually ended up in Patton's Army, and then he was in the Battle of the Bulge. And so he was, and my uncle was in Italy and another uncle was in the Philippines and Attu and Kiska, and my mother's cousins were in New Guinea. I mean there's pictures on the mantel piece of dead cousins in uniforms and that was, everybody's household was kind of like that.

Karl Marlantes

And you sort of as a kid, it was called the service, that was when your dad was in the service, that was when your mom, it was when your cousins or whatever was in the service. We didn't call it the military. It's a sort of a new term for it in a way.

Interviewer

And the term service obviously has its notion of virtue and, did you tap into that word as meaningful?

Karl Marlantes

It was almost like the zeitgeist. It was like, I was pretty much unconscious of it. It was sort of what boys did. Most boys didn't want to get drafted. I mean they wanted to do what they wanted to do, but you sort of said well if you do get drafted, well then you owe the country two years. That's what you do. And then you come home and the girls are waiting for you and then you have children. So it was very unconscious, un-self reflective sort of thing.

Karl Marlantes

And then the other alternative is well you're probably going to get drafted anyway so you might as well volunteer because then you get a better chance of what you want. Like if you wanted to fly jets in the Air Force or for me, sort of well the Marine Corps and there was this Landmark book called The Story of the U.S. Marines. Remember the Landmark books? The story of Betsy Ross, our American flag maker? Well, I must have read that in that tiny little library 20 times when I was a kid. I just was fascinated by the Marine Corps.

Interviewer

What attracted you to the Marine Corps? What was it about that, obviously the book you're telling [me about] was significant but what was the calling that you saw there?

Karl Marlantes

I'll tell you. That's interesting. First of all I work in images. I remember

Interviewer

You mean you think in images.

Karl Marlantes

I think in images. And the image that just came to me was older kids from my high school disappearing to some mysterious place called San Diego down in California. And they would come back. I swear they looked three inches taller, four inches wider in the shoulders, lean, suntanned guys. Men. And I said I want some of that. I mean that was a big motivator. There was the sort of the patriotism motivator, but I have to admit that that was probably secondary to I want to be one of them. I want to be a Marine like that. And that was probably the two things.

Interviewer

So it was like completing your growth.

Karl Marlantes

Exactly. It's like part of coming into age as a man was your military service. That's no longer with us.

Interviewer

When you actually did go to boot camp—I mean Quantico, I'm sorry.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, Quantico, yeah.

Interviewer

Did you find that you were in the process that you had dreamed or was it harder than you thought?

Karl Marlantes

No. I actually thought it was funny. To me it was just—I mean it's that stuff, there was this kid that showed up. This poor guy's probably seeing the psychiatrist to this day—he had asked the recruiter if there were golf courses and the recruiter says oh, there's all kinds of golf courses! They're all around. So he showed up, I remember we were riding on a bus, with his bag of golf clubs. And the drill instructors were like bees to honey! I mean I can remember him sort of—you know it was dark, it was like midnight and the lights were on in this parking lot and we've got the little yellow squares where you stand, the little yellow shoes.

Karl Marlantes

And it was like “Oh, you're a golfer?” And the entire time that we were there, this guy—we carried rifles, he carried his golf clubs. “Right shoulder arms!” Kachink, kachink, kachink! You know, I mean it was just—it was funny. It was hard. I mean god, you know, people screaming at you and throwing you to lockers and you know, one guy would go in a locker and the drill instructors pound on it and say are you happy in there? And it'd be like “yes, sir!” He says, “how do I know you're happy?” “I'm smiling, sir!” “can't see you smiling.” “How do I know you're smiling?” “Smile, smile, smile.” Well I broke into laughter.

Karl Marlantes

The guys stuffed me upside down in the same locker, two of us in this, you know. And I thought this is just weird, you know? For some reason that kind of stuff didn't bother me. I just thought it was funny. And I liked climbing obstacle courses and jumping out of things. It just suited me. I was an athlete and it was good for me.

Interviewer

Quantico came for you after our stint as a Rhodes scholar, let's back up into the

Karl Marlantes

No, the way it worked is that during college I would go to Quantico for these summer trainings.

Interviewer

I see. Okay.

Karl Marlantes

And then when I took the scholarship, the Marines "I thought they wouldn't let me go and it was spring of '67. They were real short of junior officers. And I wrote them a letter and said I won the Rhodes Scholarship and would it be okay if I, you know, did my active service, you know extended my whatever, waited two years to do my active service.

Karl Marlantes

And they surprised me. They said that's great. It's a great honor for the Marine Corps. Go do it. And they assigned me to a like some kind of inactive status in London. It was some kind of administrative way of doing it. So I got to go. But within six weeks I was feeling guilty because I believe five kids from my little high school died in Vietnam.

Karl Marlantes

And all these guys I'd gone through training with in these years when I was in college, they were over there by the fall of '68. '67, by the fall of '67. And I was feeling bad.

Karl Marlantes

And the war was looking dicey. I mean at that stage it was like I don't know if we should be there or not, but I had sort of raised my right hand and I had become a Marine officer. And so I said "it would be desertion if I decided not to go. And so I couldn't sit on the fence. For me it was I'm either going to go to Sweden or Algeria. Those were two places that were taking deserters, or I'd go to the war. And I went to the war.

Interviewer

Was desertion a real possibility during that time for you?

Karl Marlantes

No, I don't think so. It was "I had a girlfriend that talked to me about it and it was sort of a romantic thing, you know. But I don't think seriously it was. I think the more serious issues was staying there and just kind of hiding behind the privilege. And I woke up one morning "I was in Africa because I'd taken the money from my scholarship and gone

off there.

Karl Marlantes

And you can't hide behind privilege. This is not right. Everybody else who isn't privileged is out there fighting, and so I turned my it's a funny story. I turned myself into a Navy base at Kanitra and by this time I had one of these smelly camel hair jalavas and yellow shoes with curly toes, and I walk in and get my way to the personnel office and there's this young JG [junior grade officer] sitting there and I say Lieutenant Marlantes, United States Marine Corps, I want to report for active service.

Karl Marlantes

And this guy looks at me. I remember him shoving his chair back from his desk and he says "Why me?" [Laughter] So we ended up talking and he sent me back to England. And I wrote a letter from England and within a couple of weeks I was in Quantico.

Interviewer

For people watching this who don't "didn't live through the 1960s, it will sound almost like"

Karl Marlantes

Bizarre.

Interviewer

Middle ages or something.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, right.

The Cultural Schizophrenia of the '60s
Interviewer

Give us a sort of pencil sketch of what those times were like and how the war was central to the cultural revolution that was going on in America and throughout the world really.

Karl Marlantes

How am I going to frame this? First of all, the '60s didn't happen in a decade. They happened in I think about an 18 month period. I mean if you look at 1965-1966, the people looked like 1955-1956.

Karl Marlantes

By 1969, it was just a stunning difference. I mean, the guy's hair had grown long. I mean people were smoking marijuana. I mean it was "drugs came in big time. LSD. Marijuana. Mescaline. I mean, so that's a huge part. That wasn't there in 1965.

Karl Marlantes

The other thing is that the Pill wasn't available in 1965, so suddenly "summer of love in San Francisco," I think it was '67 I don't remember. Anyway, you couldn't have the summer of love without the Pill. Just wouldn't happen. And

things like when I first went to Yale, you were required to wear a coat and tie at the dining hall.

Karl Marlantes

By 1967-66, there was this rebellion in the air and we stillâ€”the rules were there so people would show up with a coat and a tie and no shirt and shorts or underwear one day. Just to sort of flip the middle finger at authority. And the â€™60s was just filled with that. And it was my generation that was responsible for this sort of weâ€™re not going to take this anymore, whatever this was, which was kind of you know, towing the mark. Kind of following in your parentâ€™s footsteps. It was like a whole new world. And I think that the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement coincided with this atmosphere of rebellion that just become explosive.

Interviewer

Did you find yourself caught up in one side or the other of this?

Karl Marlantes

Oh, I was on one side definitely. I mean I can remember having a fierce debate in my college room with some other friends about Vietnam War. This was my senior year. And I remember blurting out to them itâ€™s like somethingâ€”â€œthe American President wouldnâ€™t lie to Americans!â€ And they laughed. And I was like what?

Karl Marlantes

So I was naïve in the sense ofâ€”and I tell my children that today. They go like, â€œWhat were you thinking? I mean, come on! American President doesnâ€™t lie? Come on.â€ I didnâ€™t believe an American President would lie to Americans. I solidly didnâ€™t believe that.

Karl Marlantes

Well, I was much disabused of that belief and so I was on the side of what you might call naiveté. I think sometimes weâ€™ve slipped over to the side of cynicism in our current decades and thatâ€™s just as unhealthy. Some place in between is a better place to be.

Karl Marlantes

But Vietnam threw all that in the air. There was no longer sort of like oh you want to be a U.S. Senator? Well thatâ€™s a really great thing. Itâ€™s like what? You want to be a politician? Good God! And the same for being in the military, you know be a soldier or Marine. Itâ€™s like are you some kind of a fool? You know, that happened in that very short time period.

Interviewer

Did you find yourself mocked and abused by your classmates at Yale for choosing to be a Marine? Because already you had actually started that path.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, I would get the occasional sort of why in the world are you doing this? But I was not the kind of person that would have taken mockery very well so nobody did it. [Laughter]

Karl Marlantes

But I would get these questions. Sort of like looking at you askance and it was almost like a rhetorical, like I'm going to give you a statement about I really do think you're stupid about doing this and why don't you quit? And I just wouldn't quit. Because of the way I was raised and who I was.

Interviewer

You must have felt very lonely, I would think.

Karl Marlantes

Well it did and it didn't. I mean the sense—in terms of being in the military I had the feeling nobody really understood what I was up to or who I was or why I was doing it. But I didn't feel lonely. I had the rugby team.

Karl Marlantes

And that's what saved me at Yale. I joined the rugby team and I really loved those guys. And oddly enough there were quite a few guys that went into the military who were on the rugby team. Similar type of person.

Interviewer

Were there drugs at Yale at the time?

Karl Marlantes

Yes. That was when it began to happen. I mean, Yale had always been a place where guys were good drinkers. I mean that sort of Ivy League sort of—you know, have a bourbon and water, you know? So that drug, alcohol, had been there for centuries.

Karl Marlantes

But the new drugs coming in. I remember freshman year it was like whoa! What's this stuff? It's called peyote, you know, and we could just write—there was a place in Texas. Laredo, Texas. And you get it in the mail. You just wrote them and said send me some peyote buttons. It wasn't even illegal I don't think. And so we'd be there smashing peyote cactus buttons and put it in orange juice and, you know, wow man! Cool! We'd see colors. And then you felt sort of like you were really cool—you were special because you didn't do what they called juicers. Juicers were guys that drink alcohol, see? And that was

Interviewer

So you did some drugs at Yale?

Karl Marlantes

Oh, yeah. I did marijuana at Yale, but not a lot. I had to study and I had to pass. And it was sort of more of like oh I can be one of these cool people. I can do drugs. I'm with it, you know, but I didn't—a lot of kids started doing drugs and I think it ruined their lives. I wasn't one of them. I was sort of what you might call a social drug user. I'll tell you one funny story. Timothy Leary and Richard Alford were two Harvard professors who were really into acid.

Interviewer

LSD.

Karl Marlantes

LSD, yeah. And I was reading about that and I thought this would be so cool, and there was a mansion up in Millbrook, New York. And so I hitchhiked up to Millbrook, New York to see the gurus you know, and I got thereâ€”

Interviewer

A mansion where the two of them were?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, thatâ€™s right. They were there with a bunch of their followers.

Karl Marlantes

And I show upâ€”you know Iâ€™m still this kid from Oregon and I still have short hair, you know? Clearly not one of the group, you know? â€œWhat are you doing here?â€ I said, â€œOh, I want to talk to Timothy Leary. Well, theyâ€™re not here today.â€ And so I ended up sort of smoking marijuana and then when someone offered me some acid I was afraid to take it, so I wentâ€”because I thought â€œMan with my imagination, this is going to be really bad.â€

Karl Marlantes

So I said, â€œWell, no, cool, you know I donâ€™t like to do acid very much, and I got to get back to school.â€ So I spent the night there and hitchhiked back to Yale. That was my foray intoâ€”

Interviewer

What an interesting mix you were though, because on the one hand youâ€™re this straight arrow believer that the President never lies, already joined the Marine Corps.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah.

Interviewer

Wanting to do your service like those in your family and in your town had done for generations. And yet you also were sort of tiptoeing into the cultural revolution that your own generation was a part of.

Karl Marlantes

Sure. I think that I probably reflected the actual way the society was. The society was split. I mean you could go to, I donâ€™t know, Dubuque, Iowa, and it would still be 1965 and you could go to San Francisco, and it was definitely 1969.

Karl Marlantes

So the whole of the United States was schizophrenic in that sense. I meanâ€”yeah, I mean was sort of like oldâ€”you wantedâ€”I was a kid. You wanted to be cool. You want to be with it. Well, being in the Marine Corps wasnâ€™t cool anymore. Being sort of a guy that did, oh yeah you know Timothy Leary or whatever, oh that would be cool. I could get some cache on that. So yeah, I was trading with my basic core, which is what I made my choice at Oxford, was to go do my duty, you know. But I was torn.

Semper Fidelis
Interviewer

Tell me about the Vietnam War at the time. Both in what your attitudes were and what juncture it was in when you finally were deployed to Vietnam.

Karl Marlantes

Well, in the beginning people were sort of like I wonder where that is? And you had President Johnson talking about how the North Vietnamese attacked our Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin and the Congress with an overwhelming voteâ€”I think there were two nos, one from Morrison in Oregon actually and he took a lot of heat for that.

Interviewer

Wayne Morse. Senator Wayne Morse, right.

Karl Marlantes

Wayne Morse. And someone else, I canâ€™t remember who the other no vote was. But the country was well they canâ€™t attack our ships over there! And there was a lot of stories aboutâ€”you know, youâ€™d read I think it was Bishop Fulton Sheen about how the Catholics were being persecuted in Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese were pounding chopsticks through their childrenâ€™s ears. There was a lot of stuff like that.

Karl Marlantes

And, believe me, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong committed atrocities. So Iâ€™m not saying that all that was propaganda but not the way it was portrayed. I mean it looked to me like a pretty legitimate civil war about which way they wanted to govern their country.

Interviewer

Even then it looked to you that way?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. But we were involved and they had attacked our ships and all that sort of stuff. But by 1967, Iâ€™m a senior. It really is starting to not add up. There are starting to be questions about what are we doing and how do we know when weâ€™ve won? It was the first war that we got into that there was no clear objective. I mean World War II was like well we liberated Paris. Whatâ€™s next? Cross the Rhine. Whatâ€™s next? Berlin. You could actually measure progress and are you winning or losing the war.

Karl Marlantes

In Vietnam it devolved into body count and thatâ€™s no way of measuring whether you win or lose a war. Especially if youâ€™re the small population going into a larger population countryâ€”who can outweigh you.

Interviewer

But what motivated you then? I mean even though it was a different kind of war. I mean, the objective is that we were stopping the flow of communism, the spread ofâ€”

Karl Marlantes

The domino theoryâ€”all that.

Interviewer

Did you believe that at the time?

Karl Marlantes

I was skeptical of that. I could see that well itâ€™s an argument but I remember thinking, well so what if Laos and Cambodia become Communist countries? What do I care? I can remember saying even if theyâ€™re right about the spread of communism, which I was skeptical of and it proved out obviously it wasnâ€™t right. I mean they were fighting the Chinese two years after we left, so that was clearly a wrong theory, but at the time who would know?

Karl Marlantes

I just was sort ofâ€”I wasnâ€™t sure. What was more important to me was that my friends were over there and I felt that that was important. And I was like a lot of kids. I wondered what it was like, you know? You read the story of the U.S. Marines 20 times when youâ€™re 8 years old, or 8 to 12.

Karl Marlantes

I wonder what itâ€™s like? How would I react? What would it be like to be in combat? And there was a genuine war going on, so that was a motivator. I canâ€™t deny that.

Interviewer

Sounds like the clear motivations were number one, to be with your friends. I mean they were doing it soâ€”

Karl Marlantes

They were doing itâ€”

Interviewer

You felt you had an obligation to do it.

Karl Marlantes

Either I pitch in or I declare myself you know, a deserter.

Interviewer

Right.

Karl Marlantes

I mean I'm a black and white person.

Interviewer

And on the other, though, it sounds like a still a kind of challenge to your manhood. I mean alright, you've gone through the training now. You're a Marine now. But how would you really react?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, how would I really do it. Yeah. Could I pass that test. It was always a sort of a testing. And that was part of it. And I had to own that. You could say in a way that was a selfish reason to go to war. It wasn't all patriotism. Not.

Interviewer

Sounds like very little of it was patriotism in the end. Much of it was about sort of a kind of moral bonding with your

Karl Marlantes

That's right.

Interviewer

Your fellow

Karl Marlantes

My fellow Marines. Semper Fidelis. I think that that means always faithful to the country when it needs you, but in actuality it really means always faithful to the Corps. And you go through Marine training, you feel that. And you're either on the team or you're not, and I wanted to be on the team.

Interviewer

It's an interesting question. I've always wondered about this because it's almost a cliché that people say soldiers don't fight for patriotism, they don't fight for country, they fight for the guy next to them.

Interviewer

But I'm curious about your attitude about this. The guy next to them in a sense is the country, isn't it? I mean in a way when you're fighting, you're fighting for community. You're fighting for those with whom you share your life.

Karl Marlantes

Mm-hmm. Yes.

Interviewer

In a way they're not such opposite notions fighting for country and fighting for the grunt next to you.

Karl Marlantes

In a way that's right. I think that there might be something just almost instinctual, genetic in us that you will actually sacrifice or risk sacrificing your life for the group. Once you get into that situation, it's the group is what you are protecting and so in the sense when you say it's kind of a cliché, that's a true one. You do fight for those people. But I think that's interesting the question you raised which is it's also about the community and if you can expand the community from your squad to the entire nation, then that's good.

Karl Marlantes

And maybe what happens sometimes is that people can exploit that. That sort of genetic drive that young men have to actually go out there and risk their lives for their community, you can get someone pretty pumped up about that. And a 19 year old isn't going to think about the geo-politics at all.

Karl Marlantes

And so you have to watch how you use your 19 year olds. And that's what I think sometimes we fail to understand. The 19 year old isn't thinking like you and I are right now. He's doing, and he's got an enormous amount of testosterone going through his body. He likes girls and he likes to drink and this is where he is. And you can pump him up to go to war because I think it's genetic. And the adults are responsible for making sure that we send them into the right places.

Interviewer

Interesting, almost in a way what you're describing is the responsibility of a company commander to his company, is analogous to the responsibility of the senior leadership in Washington to the fighting young, because they're in different places in their lives.

Karl Marlantes

That's right. Absolutely. And they should have the maturity. And the tragedy is they often don't. The difference between a statesman and a politician, if you want to use the more pejorative sense of politician, is that the statesman is actually looking out for his community. He's trying to do what's right for the larger group, not himself. The politician's trying to get reelected. That's a self-centered approach to life as opposed to an other-centered approach to life.

Cauldron of Cultural Upheaval

Interviewer

Now it strikes me, though, that and this I'd like to weave back into the novel, that you're arriving there in Vietnam with, at least what you can look back on now as more complex and somewhat doubting understanding of your mission and the world around you than one would imagine a young Marine to have.

Interviewer

And the main character of Matterhorn, your novel "Mellas" represents that it seems to me on some level. There's a tremendous amount of self-interest involved in his character. He wants the medal search. He wants to

Karl Marlantes

He wants to build his resume

Interviewer

Yeah, he wants glory.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, exactly. He wants to ride back home a hero and maybe run for office.

Interviewer

Right.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. He's in that self-centered mode.

Interviewer

And yet when he arrives there, there's also a sense he has that he's learned from a blackboard and a drill sergeant. He hasn't learned from the experience.

Karl Marlantes

Right.

Interviewer

Of actually being in combat. And there's a certain modesty to him as he sees that. I think it's a saving grace in him that has a certain humility as he approaches his leadership.

Karl Marlantes

That's why you tend to like him. He's self-doubt. Because otherwise he would just be an unlikable character. And it's very hard to have people turning the page if they don't like this character. So you like Mellas because he is aware of his shortcomings in the sense of his experience. He's aware that he's really scared. He really, you know, got himself into this situation because it sounded like a lot of glory and now he may not come back alive.

Karl Marlantes

And so you can't the reader I think realizes that this is a very young person struggling with something. And then he's got his dark side, which is this ambition that he exhibits. And, of course, the character Ark as he's through the novel begins to understand that he has to move toward a more compassionate other oriented

Interviewer

Is it dark or is it just realistic?

Karl Marlantes

That's probably right. Well, it's realistic. We all have dark sides.

Interviewer

Yes.

Karl Marlantes

That's for sure.

Interviewer

And also is it dark or is it just the ego? Because in a sense what you have described here is he's got some self-interest, but he's also tempered by his understanding that he has a role in this community. I mean that's the tension that you find.

Karl Marlantes

That's right. Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer

And I want you to speak to this because it ties back to the '60s, what we just talked about. There are so many clashes of sort of opposites going on in your book. And they define the '60s in some respects, in a macro-sense.

Karl Marlantes

Right.

Interviewer

Class.

Karl Marlantes

Definitely, yeah.

Interviewer

Race.

Karl Marlantes

Right.

Interviewer

Authority to those between authority and those who respond and subject to your authority.

Karl Marlantes

Yes.

Interviewer

Foreign versus known.

Karl Marlantes

Mm-hmm, right.

Interviewer

And leadership versus the lad, I mean in the micro-sense I mean.

Karl Marlantes

Sure, yeah.

Interviewer

Thereâ€™s all those sort of opposite notions working at once. And they seem to have come to a head in the â€™60s, and Vietnam becomes a kind of vehicle through which you can exploit that. Am I speaking correctly?

Karl Marlantes

No, I think you are speaking correctly. That the novel is very much about theseâ€”now whatâ€™s the right word? Iâ€™m supposed to be a writer. I should come up with the word, but theseâ€”I guess the word is clashes in our culture that you need to reconcile the opposites. You need to try and work through class and race. They exist and they still exist. And Vietnam highlighted it.

Karl Marlantes

It was like, for example, the myth was that â€œOh Americaâ€™s the classless society.â€ You know, Europeans, oh they have class, if youâ€™re born in upper crust then you have it made and if youâ€™re poor thereâ€™s no chance.

Karl Marlantes

Well, Vietnam pretty well dispelled that image because the kids that were middle class and above that could go to college, had something called the 2S deferment. They didnâ€™t have to get drafted. And the kids that didnâ€™t have that got drafted. So it was all of a sudden very clear that our classless society was very much class structured.

Karl Marlantes

And of course the racism was againâ€”I could only think it was sort of like we donâ€™t talk about that. You know, itâ€™s the elephant in the room. Well, weâ€™re up here in the north. Weâ€™re not racist. Well, I lived in a community where there were no African Americansâ€”so it was very easy for me to be not racist. I mean, this is a true statement.

Karl Marlantes

We had racial conflict at the labor temporal after the Friday night dances. The Swedes and the Norwegians would take on the Finns. That was our idea of racial conflict. I mean we have no idea.

Karl Marlantes

And the other thing thatâ€™s amazing as I think about this is that the first time I ever had Mexican food, first time was in Vietnam because I had a guy in my platoon named Ray Delgado whoâ€™s mother sent him something called a tamale. I had never seen that. â€œWhatâ€™s that, Ray?â€ â€œItâ€™s a tamale!â€ â€œWhoa, wow.â€ â€œYou want

some?â€œYeah.â€ I mean today Mexican food, I mean everywhere you turn around and look. Itâ€™s hard to imagine how lâ€™how separated we all were then.

Karl Marlantes

Vietnam threw that together pretty fast, and of course the riots in Wattsâ€™

Interviewer

Letâ€™s pause and talk about the racism because I think itâ€™s hard for a young cadet, for instance, now to understand the sort of throbbing nature of racism in the 1960sâ€™the late 1960s, as you say post â€™65. I mean, something happened to change and sort ofâ€™I think lâ€™ve heard you describe itâ€™itâ€™s as if we were sitting on a volcano, unaware that weâ€™re sitting on a volcano, and it started to erupt.

Karl Marlantes

Right. And it started to erupt. The lava started flowing. It started flowing in the south when the freedom riders went down there. Suddenly the south had to deal with the fact that the blacks werenâ€™t voter registered. And thatâ€™s what was going on. And then suddenly itâ€™s in the papers. So youâ€™re starting to be aware of something.

Karl Marlantes

Well, that was only a few years before Vietnam heated up. That was â€™62-â€™63. Medgar Evers and all the freedom riders, what was it Stokely Carmichael, SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], and so that was starting to happen.

Karl Marlantes

Well, within four or five years that awareness amongst the African American community that this isnâ€™t fair, was everywhere. And you combine that with the generation thatâ€™s going to overthrow authority, thatâ€™s going to lend credence to it. And you have a war going on where theyâ€™re drafting African Americans and itâ€™s not even fair at home. And you get the Black Panthers who are saying why donâ€™t we just go to war here? And suddenly youâ€™re staring at almostâ€™well, there was a fear of civil war. I mean, people go no thatâ€™s crazy. I remember people talking to me. What happens if the Black Panthers really take over and they start arming? And the African American community arms and decides that theyâ€™re going toâ€™I donâ€™t know what theâ€™secede from the Union or something! It was in the air. It wasnâ€™t in the air by â€™65. By â€™69 it was everywhere.

Karl Marlantes

Martin Luther Kingâ€™s assassination I think just was the final sort of blow. And lâ€™ve always said I think itâ€™s a great credit to the African American community that they didnâ€™t just let the lid blow off. There were people trying very hard to say, look itâ€™s a crazy man. The guy killed him. Itâ€™s not like the white people tried to kill him. And to try and keep people more sane.

Karl Marlantes

But I was seriouslyâ€™I think I was at Quantico then. I was seriously wondering if we were going to have to go out and do riot duty because that was such an enormous outrage.

Interviewer

Now tell me, because it comes up in the novel, how you saw this in Vietnam.

Karl Marlantes

Well, the way you saw it in Vietnam was the African American Marines and probably soldiers would get a lot of literature. I mean they would just get pamphlets from theâ€”you know, why are you over there fighting the white manâ€™s war? You know, againstâ€”I canâ€™t remember how James Rado said it. I put it in my book but I canâ€™t remember how to quote it. But it was something about why would a black man fight a red man for a white man sort of a thing, you know.

Karl Marlantes

And that stuff was always prevalent. And, letters from home, you know about whatâ€™s going on in the neighborhood. And these kids are over thereâ€”if you think I was conflicted, boy those African American Marines were like why am Iâ€”whatâ€™s going on? If we canâ€™t be registered to vote in Alabama and go to the same colleges.

Karl Marlantes

Well it was all starting to break loose. I mean [President Lyndon] Johnson did an enormous job where the Great Society and theâ€”I canâ€™t remember what itâ€™s calledâ€”the Civil Rights Act [of 1965]? But it had just started and all the previous time people were mad. And we dealt with it.

Interviewer

How did youâ€”well letâ€™s go to the novel because the novel is such a great vehicle through which to see these things. Describe to me some of the characters in the novel who represented this, and how you, letâ€™s sayâ€”I have a sense that youâ€™re Mallas, even if youâ€™re not Mallas.

Karl Marlantes

Well, yeahâ€”no, I mean Mallas sees what I saw at that point. Heâ€™s the central character.

Interviewer

So how did you, as a leader, have to learn from that?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. Thereâ€™s two central black characters in the novel. Jackson, who is a very competent leader. Mallas learns a lot about leadership from Jackson. And China, who is the black radical, who is very enthused and souled by the Black Panthersâ€™ ideals. And Malcolm X, the more radical blacks.

Karl Marlantes

And thereâ€™s a conflict because Jackson understands fully well the unfairness of it all. Thereâ€™s this conversation about you donâ€™t think I donâ€™t know who Emmitt Till is? You know? Just because you think youâ€™re this radical, Black Panther in a Marine uniformâ€”I mean they have this conflict and it ends up at the end of the conversation with that fundamental dilemma that I think a lot of these black Marines faced, which is that are

you going to be on the side of your brothers or are you going to try and do it right and join the larger society? In other words, Jackson is faced with the possibility of retaining a squad. Like he said, his father never had anybody reporting to him and here he has 12 and heâ€™s only 19 and maybe he could be general some day. Thatâ€™s thatâ€™that opportunity was offered in the military.

Karl Marlantes

And China is saying thatâ€™s just stupid! â€œHow can you say youâ€™re a brother? How can you have any solidarity with the real cause here?â€ And these two face off and itâ€™s theseâ€™itâ€™s this conflict that is an actual true conflict. One represents one side, one represents the other. And Iâ€™m quite sure that a lot of African Americans in the Marine Corps at the time were conflicted by that.

Karl Marlantes

I just heard a guy talking about how at West Point there was a deal about hairâ€™because the afro was the big popular hairdo. And the hair wasâ€™the ruling was that the African Americans could have hair as long as the most senior cadet. And the most senior cadet, this history professor related, had enormous pressure to grow his hair longer than he wanted toâ€™because of this idea of solidarity. And so thereâ€™even in the U.S. Military Academy, there was this tension that was building and had to be dealt with.

Interviewer

Interesting that for each of these levels, and weâ€™I go to some of the others in a second, but there is this tension now between the idealism of Jackson and the cynicism of China.

Karl Marlantes

But China is an idealist.

Interviewer

And in some ways Jackson is a cynic?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer

Yeah, because Jackson is seeing his own self-interest in going forward, right?

Karl Marlantes

Exactly.

Interviewer

But on the other hand, heâ€™s believing in the system and that itâ€™s going to reward him properly, fairly, right?

Karl Marlantes

Right, yeah. He hopes.

Interviewer

But Chinaâ€™s not believing the system. On the other hand, heâ€™s an idealist that the way to go is the purity?

Karl Marlantes

Is the purity. Yeah. And of course my view as the writer is itâ€™s the in between. I mean you have to make change, but if you make this radical change the way that China wanted to do itâ€”and China comes to that. He gets himself in trouble because he loses control, and then at the end of the novel the mistaken fragging is the result of that. And so he learns to come this way a little bit. And I think thatâ€™s what happened in the culture, too.

That Was the Marine Corps

Interviewer

There is also a tension between death and life. Death is all around you, essentially.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah.

Interviewer

Your mission is death. And itâ€™s to avoid death. And yet youâ€™re probably are living through that in the most intense experience of life at the same time. Can you speak to that sense of excitement or vitality in a way that warfare or combat can bring?

Karl Marlantes

Sure. Iâ€™ve thought about this, because this is something that isâ€”I donâ€™t know what to make of this. But if you read about mysticsâ€”spiritual mystics, and their experiences, there are several things that this mystical experience has in common. One, constant awareness of your own mortality. That your death is right over your shoulders, Don Juan. Two, you are always trying to be in the present. Not in the past, not in the future. Be here now. Three, you put the lives of other people above your own life. You learn that to beâ€”to be other oriented. And four, generally youâ€™re speaking you join a group of some kind. The Songa of the Buddhists, or what was itâ€”the Ulum of the Muslimsâ€”the church of the Christians.

Karl Marlantes

Every one of these things is absolutely true for a combat unit. Every one of them. Awareness of your own death. The attitude toward the care of other people. Being in the moment, youâ€™re always in the moment. Being part of a group. And so then in a way, itâ€™s an identical experience. Itâ€™s just sort of the other side of the coin.

Karl Marlantes

And would you take, you know, some mysticâ€”I mean Saint John of the Cross or Saint Francis of Assisi, or some Hindu saint and say well why donâ€™t you come back and flip burgers at McDonalds? Thatâ€™s what weâ€™re asking. Because itâ€™sâ€”so this thing about combat is that it is utterly other than youâ€™ve ever experienced. And itâ€™s so intense and youâ€™re so part of it and youâ€™re so necessary. And thatâ€™s another big part of it. If you donâ€™t show up, someone dies. How much more important can you be in your life?

Karl Marlantes

If you don't show up for work at McDonalds, the burgers are going to get sold. And though the boss will just wonder why you didn't show up that day, maybe fire you but that's not a big consequence.

Karl Marlantes

So suddenly you're not even important anymore. How do you get back to that sense of I really count? And I think my analogy for it, and I think that it's important for people to understand because if people say "Oh, it's ugly, oh god." You know, the kids are going to go like well, "I can't believe that. I'm going to go see for myself what it's like."

Karl Marlantes

The fact is, it has that side. It's like using crack cocaine. If you deny that crack cocaine isn't a high, you're lying. The thing is, you pay an enormous price to use crack. And combat is like that. It can be a high. It's dreadful. It's awful. And yet it can be this incredible high and then you pay. You pay with dead bodies, dead friends. A lot of sorrow. Suffering probably the rest of your life.

Karl Marlantes

It's something that we ask of soldiers and I don't think we really understand and quite often I don't think the soldiers, the young ones, understand what is being asked. I'm no pacifist. I just wish people really knew what they were asking.

Interviewer

You know, there's a theme—well a good long section of the book in which the demands upon your unit are just overpowering.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah.

Interviewer

Days with literally scarce if none—no rations.

Karl Marlantes

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

The prevalence of immersion foot. You're dragging—bringing a dead body through the jungle as your work—the sense of exhaustion, just utter exhaustion.

Interviewer

And I found myself wondering as the call is radioed in to go to Echo, that—you're going to have to go even further. You know, even though you think oh now I've reached my destination—

Karl Marlantes

Right. Checkpoint.

Interviewer

Yes. And is it Simpson who screams out of that you know, you f-ing coward. Who do you think you are? Youâ€™reâ€”

Karl Marlantes

Youâ€™re belingering or whateverâ€”

Interviewer

Right, right. And I found myself credulity scratched a little bit there wondering whyâ€”if I were in that unit I wouldâ€™d have to be a mutiny at this point, you know? What kept them going? And what did you, as Mellasâ€”youâ€”do as a leader to keep them going? And is it the right thing to keep them going?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, interesting. I had a friend read that book who was in the Air Force, and he had exactly the same reaction you did. And he was terribly angry when Mellas and Hawk and Fitch, when the Army helicopter pilot arrived with the batteries, and he said â€œGee, how come you guysâ€”â€

Interviewer

â€œWhere are the rations?â€

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, and it was likeâ€”and no one said a word. That would beâ€”that is absolutely true. Because of that sense of incredible pride, you would never admit. Itâ€™s like the family thatâ€™s got problems inside the family. Maybe dad is beating the kids. You would never break the family code and talk about it outside. That was the Marine Corps.

Karl Marlantes

And weâ€”I mean I did stretch the hunger thing, but we did go four days with no food once. And had been on half rations because a screw up had happened and a company got dropped in without adequate rations. We had to split ours with them. And then the fog set in, and we were on a mission, and the mission had to get accomplished. And we did it without food. And we got a supply chopper in, and it didnâ€™t have any food on it. It had batteries. And we didnâ€™t tell them.

Karl Marlantes

Because that was the Army and weâ€™re not going to admit to them that we had something go wrong here. And itâ€™s just pride. And thatâ€™s what gets you through. And I think thatâ€™sâ€”you know Iâ€™m proud to have been a Marine and thatâ€™s what Marines have gotten drilled into their head is that, god dammit, weâ€™ll get the mission done. And even if our officer is screwing up. And see in the book, donâ€™t forget, Simpson doesnâ€™t know that theyâ€™ve been without food.

Interviewer

Right.

Karl Marlantes

Because Blakely didn't tell him. So he's not a madman at the time"

Interviewer

Right. But they know they've been without food.

Karl Marlantes

They know they've been without food.

Interviewer

And my—I guess my question back to the Marine here would be to the point of the absurd, right? The dedication to the mission to the point of the absurd.

Karl Marlantes

I don't think so. No. Because you see, you never knew—and this is what kept us motivated. This, in reality, is that we would be in the hard patch, like that time that we were without food. We didn't know why we were being asked to get to that certain point on the map. But we assumed that it must be important. Marine lives were probably at stake. If we don't show up, like we've been asked, then fellow Marines might die. And that was incredibly important.

Karl Marlantes

People would go around there must be somebody in trouble. People would—we'd talk about it. Yeah, well they can't talk about it over the radio because then the NVA would pick up on it. And we would talk about that.

Interviewer

But you have an interesting duality there, too, though because in a sense that makes me think"

Karl Marlantes

I'm a mass of duality!

Interviewer

[Laughter] So that makes me think though about your trust that the President never lies. I mean"

Karl Marlantes

Yeah.

Interviewer

I mean your notion here as a Marine when you got down—when the sauce is boiled down

to the finest element here is well, really they must have a good motive in mind. The mission must be pure.

Karl Marlantes

Yup. That's right.

Interviewer

And then at the same time you're portraying the leadership as disconnected. Abusive to the point of drinking and flowing in their own excesses while you and the other grunts are out there doing their bidding.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. Has that ever been different since the military has been formed? The generals are back in the tent with nice food and the troops are out there shivering their asses off? I think that has always been the case and I think it's something that the military deals with—sometimes not very well. And I don't care what branch, what country you're talking about.

Karl Marlantes

I have a lot of guys come up to me at readings and say, "Thank god you've finally told the story straight. That happens." Because, again, goes back to this human thing. If you're back in the rear and there's plenty of beer and lots of wine and nice food, what are you going to say? I'm not going to do it because my guys are starving? Not going to do it, you know?

Karl Marlantes

The other thing is that in the novel there are good officers. Like you've got Mulvaney, who really does care. And I picked a couple to make them villains because it's a novel and I have to have antagonists. But there were ticket-punching officers. There were. I knew them. And I've talked to guys who knew who they were.

Karl Marlantes

I had a guy at a reading stand up and say, "My battalion commander landed off of a chopper. He had one canteen full of gin and the other one full of water. And he was an alcoholic." That happens. And so I took those cases and I said well, I'll make my two villains. But the two villains are not evil. They suffer from every—I mean I'm ambitious. Blakely's ambitious.

Karl Marlantes

I know a lot of people that have drunk too much on the job, or the night before and then failed in their duty. You can get away with it in the corporation or the school district. In combat, people die as a result of the exact identical human flaw. And that's what those villains in my novel are about. They're unaware of their flaws. And it hurts people. But they're not any different than anybody else. They've just been thrown into a situation where suddenly those flaws are deadly.

Interviewer

One of the things you said a moment ago made me think about another reaction to this

novel, which is has it ever been different? In many ways your novel is like, or echoes I should say, so many other stories of war fromâ€”

Karl Marlantes

From Odysseus.

Interviewer

From The Iliad forward essentially. And I was struck, and maybe this wasâ€”I assume this was conscious because you are such an excellent writerâ€”the references constantly to the very basic elements and tools of war. I mean your E-tools, the knives, theâ€”

Karl Marlantes

Can openers.

Interviewer

Can openers, yes. That here we are in twentieth century modern combat and yet, itâ€™s not so differentâ€”itâ€™s an infantrymanâ€™s storyâ€”

Karl Marlantes

Youâ€™re still digging in. Youâ€™re building a fortification as you can. The Romans used shovels to put up palisades and they cut brush to clear fields of fire for their arrows, you know, and no, the infantryman isâ€”the weapons, the technology obviously changes but the day to day going to ground, having to live outside, andâ€”I think I told you this story butâ€”a woman coming up to me in a reading and she was a little sort of embarrassed. Sheâ€™s read the novel and she said, â€œI was a protester. I hated the war. I was very active in all the protests. I didnâ€™t know you slept outside.â€

Karl Marlantes

And I thought, my god, what a split in our culture. She didnâ€™t know we slept outside. She wasnâ€™t thinking at all obviously but it just hit me. Yeah, those things donâ€™t change. Like Sebastian Jungerâ€™s book, War, he talks about a paratrooper unit in a firebase Restrepo, the day-to-day remains, virtually identical.

Interviewer

Well it becomes a metaphor for the fact that the human experience is essentially the same.

Karl Marlantes

Exactly. Yes, I think thatâ€™s right. We do learn culturally but individually we seem to have to go through exact same processes. Itâ€™s just sort of ourâ€”itâ€™s the human fate. You canâ€™t sort of arriveâ€”itâ€™s that old thing, wouldnâ€™t you love to be 18 again? Yes, if I could have my current brain.

Interviewer

Did you do a lot of reading of these great war novels in preparation for the work that you doâ€”or as you went throughâ€”

Karl Marlantes

Yeah.

Interviewer

It's a 30-year process I assume.

Karl Marlantes

No, there are writers that are very important to me. Tolstoy in terms of War and Peace, and even Anna Karenina. How he handled characters was very important to me. Learning from him. I mean when I first read him I read him just like most readers. Like just wow this is an incredible novel. Quite frankly, the first time I read him I put him down because I couldn't keep up with it. I was about 16 and I put it aside.

Karl Marlantes

When I was about 25 I picked it up and couldn't put it down. I don't know what that change is. Maybe because I'd been to war. But the First World War poets—Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Rosenberg, Graves—these people were very important to me because they were the first poets that really dealt with the mechanistic horror of war.

Karl Marlantes

Up until that point a poet would talk about the prowess of the swordsman, you know mighty Achilles who could throw a spear further than anybody. And that in some way, he had some control over the damage that could be done to him because he was skillful. I don't care how smart you are or how skillful you are, by the time the First World War rolls around if the shell lands in your hole or the gas creeps down your trench, you're dead. And you have nothing to do with it.

Karl Marlantes

And so those poets really got that and they understood that. And I was quite taken with the First World War as I think maybe our own Civil War started to hit into that, but by that first World War it became more luck than skill, and surviving. And there's a particularly wonderful book called In Parentheses and I'm going to forget the name of the guy that wrote it—oh, common Karl—he's a Welshman—Jones!

Karl Marlantes

It's a very thin novel that's almost poetry it's so dense and well done. What it is is that your life goes on and then in parentheses you go to war. And then your life goes on again. And he talks about the time in parentheses. And he was very inspirational to me because he also dealt with a lot of Welsh mythology in that novel and I, of course, deal with a lot of the Parzival myth which has its roots in Welsh mythology.

The Story of Parzival

Karl Marlantes

Let's talk about the Parzival myth because it was central to your framing it sounds like.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. It came upon me as I was writing it.

Interviewer

Tell the viewers first of all what the story is.

Karl Marlantes

It's part of the grail cycle. Parzival is raised by his mother in the forest in Wales because his father had been killed in combat. And his mother said she'll never allow her child to become a warrior; so she grabs him and she takes him to the furthest place in Europe that people would think of, which in those days was Wales. And raises him with no knowledge of warfare or of knights or of any of that stuff. He's raised totally innocently.

Karl Marlantes

And her name is Herzeloyde which means broken heart. Because he leaves her. And the way he leaves her is he's out hunting with his javelot, which is sort of a short spear as far as I can understand, and he sees three knights. And he thinks they're angels because of their shiny armor and everything. He bows down to them and they say, "What are you doing? He said you're angels. We're not angels, we're knights." "What are knights?" "Oh, we work for this guy, his name is King Arthur. He lives down the road here. And we go out and do what he wants us to do."

Karl Marlantes

And it's that genetic thing I was talking about. Parzival goes back to his mother and says I want to be a knight and she of course "everything she wanted was not for him to be a knight. So she dresses him in fool's clothing because she figures "and then an old nag, and she figures if he shows up at King Arthur's court and looks like a damned fool, they'll just laugh at him and send him back. So off he goes in this clown suit that she puts him in "and you'll notice in the novel Mollus is always worried about this underwear that his mother dyed. That's the same symbol.

Karl Marlantes

You carry your mother's clothing until at some point in your life you begin to move beyond that. And Mollus starts the novel worried about his mother's clothing. And same with Parzival. Parzival encounters a red knight who has been terrorizing King Arthur's court. And Parzival's his dad's son. He has all the genetic capabilities.

Karl Marlantes

And he sees this guy coming in this bright red shining armor and the guy "and he challenges him to a fight. And the knight puts his visor down, he's got his lance, he's ready to do battle the way knights do it. And Parzival goes this is stupid. He's got a javelot and just throws it through the guy's visor, right through his eye and kills him. This is horrible. This is such an enormous "in the medieval times they used to actually execute and torture cross bowman because it was such an unfair weapon. They considered it the most dastardly thing to do, to be so evil as to use a cross bow against a knight. You should fight him fair and square.

Karl Marlantes

Well Parzival is going well this isn't "it's easy. And he steals the guy's armor and he puts it on "doesn't steal it. He takes it as booty at war and puts it on over his mother's clothing. And that's the first misuse of power. And in the novel, Mollus kills a bunch of elephants because he's afraid to look stupid. He's afraid to look like he's not in control. And he allows himself to be manipulated. In other words,

he's looking out for himself.

Karl Marlantes

And he has all the power at his control and he does the same dastardly deed. He freaks out, I mean yeah—he goes outside the code of honor. Parzival goes to the Knights of the Round Table, King Arthur accepts him. He goes through a lot of adventures, but he learns about love with Condwiramurs, who means the conductress of love—who learns about—and the symbolism in the von Eschenbach's poem which is a 13th century German poem, is when they do their first night together they don't have sexual relations. There's a sword in between them. It's a symbol of the joining of the masculine and the feminine in a symbolic sense. The key of the whole myth, though, is that he runs across the suffering Fisher King, and this comes from the ancient sort of ideas about kings having to be sexually potent. If they're not, they actually used to kill them in the early, more vegetated sort of cultures that we all come from.

Karl Marlantes

He's suffering a wound. He's in a boat and he's fishing and this—the wound is a spear to the testicles. And the symbol is the stop of the masculine fecundity, the power to fertilize. And it's the grail cup is the feminine symbol. And it's only the combination of these things that allows humans to be fully human. And the myth—the story is that the Fisher King will suffer until an innocent fool asks the right question.

Karl Marlantes

And Parzival is invited to the grail castle and he sees paraded before him the grail and this masterful sort of ceremony. But he's been taught—King Arthur's rules and one of the rules of knighthood is don't ask stupid questions. So he keeps his mouth shut and he's kicked out of the grail castle because he fails in his mission.

Karl Marlantes

And, of course, the opening of the novel is a Fisher who has a leech up his penis. And it definitely has stopped the flow. And that's why that's an opening. Not to mention the fact it's a good grabber and starts people reading, but that's why his name is Fisher and that's what that's all about.

Karl Marlantes

And Mollas doesn't ask the question of compassion. He doesn't want to ask stupid questions. You'll notice he's always afraid of looking dumb. Same problem with Parzival. Parzival goes through enormous adventures and he gets beat up by life. In the myth it's like 20 or 30 years. He leaves home, he wanders around because he's kicked out of the grail castle—it's that sense of trying to come back to yourself in your adulthood. And he is accused by the dark feminine power, a horrible, ugly person named Cundrie, who rides up on an old mule and she's bores kind of a snout for a nose and frizzy hair. And of course that's Kendra on the hospital ship.

Karl Marlantes

And the feminine power accuses Parzival of blowing it, and until Parzival accepts that he has made those mistakes and bows to that feminine power, he can't get there as a man. And then what happens in the myth is he goes back to the grail castle because Cundrie has accused him, and that is what sets him there. And he asks what ails you

uncle? Which is the question of compassion. And the Fisher King is cured. And Parzival has a half brother named Feirefiz who is literally piebald, he's black and white, because his father had him with a Moorish woman named Belecane. And the only person that can beat Parzival is his half brother. They are absolutely equal in power.

Karl Marlantes

And of course China suffers with vitiligo because China is Mella's alter ego. He's Feirefiz. And Feirefiz means proud heart, and there's China with that proud heart.

Interviewer

Where's the question of compassion in your novel?

Karl Marlantes

When Fisher comes back—first of all Mella moves from the self-centered view, and he goes through all the sort of the sacraments and there's the baptism, and he becomes more and more other-oriented. He realizes where he is, and finally by the time he's through this series, he's at the stage where he's not doing it for a medal, he's doing it to help. He's doing his deeds because his friends are in danger and he's trying to help them. That's a big switch.

Karl Marlantes

And the final scene is when Fisher comes back and Mella asks him how he is. Mella asks the question, "Are you okay?" Not, "Thank god you're back, I need a squad leader," which is where he would have been three months earlier. Now his primary focus is "Are you okay?" And then "thank god you're back, I need a squad leader." So that's sort of the structure of the novel.

Interviewer

You said to me earlier that you didn't naturally parallel the Parzival myth until you actually discovered with a little "Aha!" moment.

Karl Marlantes

Exactly.

Interviewer

Tell me about that.

Karl Marlantes

Well first of all, Parzival myth is the story primarily of a male coming to maturity. There's another myth that a lot of people point to which is the female myth which is the Amor and Psyche myth, but this happens to be the one that fits the guys. And I'm sitting there writing a novel about a young man coming to maturity and oddly enough he's following the myth. And I'm going like "Aha!" You know and then "I don't know what draft, it was quite early, you know early '80s" and then it becomes conscious to me that I was actually dealing with the same myth.

Karl Marlantes

Because in my own life I lived the myth. And if Mella is like me”

Interviewer

And why is that happened? Is that Parzival myth touches something so elemental that you almost come back to it naturally?

Karl Marlantes

Yes.

Interviewer

And there it is. That’s great art.

Karl Marlantes

That’s right. I think that’s right. That it’s part of our psychic and biological makeup. It’s the way we are. And storytelling and myths reflect”the good ones”are actual human conditions, how we are in the world. And that part of”culture you can pass on how to make better cars, but you cannot pass on how to grow up. That you have to learn every time. And that myth is about that, and because that’s how we learn to grow up.

What Stays With You After Combat

Interviewer

In your own personal story”in your own life”really the description of how this novel emerged over 30 years, written largely in your basement, right?

Karl Marlantes

Mm-hmm. Yeah. Right.

Interviewer

While you conducted a successful professional life in business. Raised a family. It strikes the observer as a story that haunted you. That you needed to get out.

Karl Marlantes

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

This was an experience as it’s described in the book, and as you’ve described it here, of intense living filled with a series of horrible images that would haunt anyone I would think going forward.

Interviewer

Describe what it’s like to have gone through combat, killed, had your own life in jeopardy, led other men through dark circumstances, and what it does to the brain.

Karl Marlantes

And what it does to the heart and soul. You’re raised basically in our country Judeo-Christian ethos””Thou shalt not kill.” And you end up doing precisely that. You

have to deal with that one.

Karl Marlantes

What it does to the brain is that it alters it physically. And people need to be aware of this. There's this truism that if you see at what point in a tour a guy is killed or wounded, it's way toward the beginning, not the end. And the reason for this, my view is, that it's proven out pretty much by what we've learned about the brain in just the last decade, is that your brain actually alters in order to handle combat.

Karl Marlantes

It takes a month or two for the neuropath ways to switch. Normally if you hear a sound and you haven't had this switch take place, you go—it goes from the auditory or the visual input through the cortex. And it's like, "I wonder what that is? Is that a bird? Is that, you know, the wind? Maybe it's the enemy."

Karl Marlantes

By the time you've done that it's too late. You're dead. And under the pressure of adrenaline apparently the brain alters the way that it receives input. And instead of going through the cortex, it goes immediately to the amygdala, which is that reptilian, you know, react, fight, flight, freeze part of our brain. So you hear the sound, there is no thought. There's no cortex. You just turn around and shoot at it. And it doesn't go back.

Karl Marlantes

And I had a terrible time with PTSD when I came back because the incident I talked about before, it astounds me but I was in an intersection and I had one of my children with me, and she was really little. She doesn't remember it.

Interviewer

Where was this?

Karl Marlantes

This was in Santa Barbara. And a guy came up behind me and honked the horn. Because he was impatient. I was trying to figure out where to turn, you know? And when I came to myself I was on the hood of his car trying to kick his windshield in. I was just enraged. And there's my little girl in the intersection, the car's stopped there, and I'm just stunned at myself. What am I doing here? I thought this is really weird.

Karl Marlantes

I had all the symptoms, you know, breaking into tears, night sweats. But I'd never heard of PTSD. And believe me, we know a lot more about it. But still there's a cultural issue I think, and the Army is starting to deal with it. There were a bunch of murders at Fort Carson. The guys who were badly affected with PTSD several tours under their belts, and you add that to alcohol and drugs, and you're going to get real problems. And it's got to be dealt with.

Karl Marlantes

And I, myself, have gone through that. Luckily I got good help. I went to the VA and I got a good psychologist and I got drugs and training so when the guy honks the horn I go 10, 9,

8â€”heâ€™s probably just had a bad day at workâ€”7, 6, 5, 4 and thenâ€”my heartâ€™s going and Iâ€™m like this but I donâ€™t get out of the car anymore and make a fool of myself. I could have ended up in jail for that one.

Interviewer

But youâ€™re permanently scarred by it.

Karl Marlantes

Permanently changed. Thereâ€™s no doubt. Heâ€™ll never go back. I mean the kids grew upâ€”youâ€™ll notice in the novel that I dedicate it to my children who lived with the good and bad of growing up with a combat veteran. Andâ€”

Interviewer

How was the bad exhibited on your children then? Temper or more something else?

Karl Marlantes

Temper, primarily. A startle pattern. For example, the child drops a glass of milk. If I see her drop the glass of milk, â€œOh well, she dropped a glass of milk.â€

Karl Marlantes

If I donâ€™t see her and the glass of milk drops and makes a sudden noise, I turn around and snarl at her. And just screamâ€”horrible. Because Iâ€™m into fear and Iâ€™ve got to fight, you know? And Iâ€™m not aware of this.

Karl Marlantes

But for my childâ€™s point of view itâ€™s like, â€œWhy is it when I drop the milk one day Dadâ€™s fine, and the other day Dad goes ballistic on me?â€ And so they grew up with this sort ofâ€”â€œWell, Dadâ€™s asleep. Well if youâ€™re going to wake him up, stand outside the door and whisper â€”Dad Iâ€™m coming inâ€™,â€ because you know if they come in and shake me Iâ€™d jump out of bed and Iâ€™d scream. And so how does a child grow up in a home where the father is that jumpy? And believe me, thatâ€™s the way it is, andâ€”

Interviewer

What about your marriage? Did it affect youâ€”

Karl Marlantes

Hmm?

Interviewer

Your first marriage?

Karl Marlantes

I lost my first marriage.

Interviewer

Because of it you think?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, sure. Absolutely. I mean she didn't understand what was happening to me. And I didn't understand what was happening to me. I can remember her saying things like, "I just don't know what it is about your energy. I can't stand your energy." And I'd go, "What's that?" I couldn't understand that. I mean that was PTSD. And she"

Interviewer

Energy, not temper. What's the difference between"

Karl Marlantes

Well, she also didn't like the temper.

Interviewer

But what was the energy?

Karl Marlantes

The energy was this sort of "apparently I'd sit at the table and I'd just be scanning all the time. Just like this, you know? And I was unaware of it. And she's been going crazy. "Gosh, can't you just relax? Can't you just look at me instead of" and that was instilled in me because that saves your life. But I couldn't stop it. And I was unconscious of it.

Karl Marlantes

At night, thrashing around, moaning. It's not temper but that's like what is that? How come he's always thrashing around and moaning? And this sort of constant sort of hyper alertness.

Interviewer

Were your dreams "dreams get disturbed by this?

Karl Marlantes

Oh, totally. I mean would "early on I would dream that I was there in Vietnam, and I was fighting and sometimes it would be almost an actual incident and sometimes it would be more dream like, but it was always set back in Vietnam and fighting. And as I got better and better, the dreams began to move more toward being at home. I would be in the states but I'd still be in the Marine Corps, and about to go on a mission, but clearly there would be no mission in reality if I was back home, but in the dream I would have.

Karl Marlantes

So over a 30 year period the dreams began to finally integrate and I don't have very many anymore. I take medicine. Basically it's Wellbutrin, and I take something for the focus that's like Ritalin. Everyday. And that helps. That smoothes me out and I don't have the problems I used to.

Karl Marlantes

But I had this terrible time. I would come into work. I worked at a very high level consulting, international consulting. And then I ended up running a corporation. And here I am, the boss, and I'm in a suit and the elevator door would shut—I'd be by myself. I'd break into sobs. Just bawling my head off! And I'd go, "What's going on?" I'd be [sounds of sobs] crying and I'd have to get it together because the elevator door is going to open and you can't have the boss showing up sobbing. I'd get it together. I couldn't understand that.

Karl Marlantes

And later in psychotherapy we realized that it was the sound and the system that was almost identical to the ramp of the chopper coming up and down. And when that ramp goes down, you're going out into the fire. Not always, but enough times that—you know, the chopper is no protection but it seems like a protection because it looks like it has got walls—they're paper thin, but that would just set me into a panic attack. And I was totally unconscious of it. So the elevator door would shut and out would—I would start bawling.

Interviewer

You describe the same thing earlier about how you kill and hold onto your psyche. And then how it emerges back to grab you again. Can you tell me about that?

Karl Marlantes

Sure. I was asked by one of the cadets in the class, how do you deal with this fact that you kill and that you really understand that this is not a monster that you've killed or an animal—it's another human being. And how can you

Interviewer

Or that scene in the book for instance where you're—the boy is crying, right?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. Exactly.

Interviewer

And the decision is

Karl Marlantes

Let him crawl and fall in—or let him be eaten by the tigers or kill him.

Interviewer

Right.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. Terrible to live with that. That happened to a friend of mine and in the sense that he ran into an encounter with a guy and he faced that problem. But the guy died on him, so he didn't actually have—I carried it a little further in the novel, but things like that happened.

Karl Marlantes

And the way I answered that is that when you're in the middle of it, you don't let it come to the surface. You clamp down on it so hard because you can't function unless you're numb and that's why they talk about the thousand mile stare, the numbness, how you're numbed in combat. That you numb yourself to feeling, because you can't function. If I allowed myself to go into the feelings during the battle, I'd cease to function as a leader. So I don't. I just

Interviewer

Although in that moment in the book

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, but he's in a different situation. There's no enemy right there.

Interviewer

Right.

Karl Marlantes

He's only got him to deal with.

What It Feels Like to Kill Someone

Interviewer

But the face morphs from something that is inhuman into something that is human.

Karl Marlantes

Exactly. Yeah. That's right. And that's that recognition. And that happened to me in reality. And I used it in the scene where Mellas gets wounded by the hand grenade.

Karl Marlantes

I actually was in a situation where we were under a hill and they were throwing grenades at us. And it was silly because they'd throw a grenade, we'd throw a grenade back, and it was like "I finally went like, 'This is really dumb.' And I worked my way around to where these two NVA soldiers were and one of them was already dead.

Karl Marlantes

And he turned and looked at me and I had him right in my sights with my M16 and I remember saying to myself, as I have Mellas say, 'If you don't throw that grenade, if you don't throw that grenade I won't shoot you.' And at that point I was looking at that kid, and he was probably 18 and he was looking at me and I was looking at him.

Karl Marlantes

Maybe 15 feet apart, about as far as this room. There's no mistaking that you're looking at someone's eyes. And he snarled at me. Just snarled at me and threw the grenade. And I killed him.

Karl Marlantes

And that human recognition is with me now, but at the time I just kept moving. I mean I killed that guy and we had to take the rest of the hill, and I didnâ€™t think twice about it. About five years after I came back from the warâ€™yeah, about five or six years. I was in with a group of people and it was one of these sort of California sort of group therapy kind of stuff, and somebody asked me about what it felt like to kill somebody.

Karl Marlantes

And I was about to go, â€œEh, you know,â€ and then the image came back to me. I started to cry. I couldnâ€™t stop crying for literally three days. I mean I wept and wept for three days. Now it wasnâ€™t probably just that guy, it was probably a whole bunch of others. It was soâ€™my ribs were so sore from sobbing thatâ€™I mean my stomach hurt, my ribs hurt. Three whole days before it finally got out.

Karl Marlantes

And even then I didnâ€™t know about PTSD, neither did anybody else. I went 15 or 20 years until these incidents with the elevators, the car in the intersection, so it stays with you a lot. And thatâ€™s when the emotion of killing a human being came out for me. Five years after it happened.

Interviewer

Are youâ€™I mean the way you describe it, it sounds like people who are victims of sexual abuse, actual people who you know have had traumatic things happen to them in their deep youthâ€™

Karl Marlantes

Sure. People with sexual abuse have post-traumatic stress disorder.

Interviewer

Right.

Karl Marlantes

Absolutely. Yeah.

The Way It Is
Interviewer

Are you bitter or resentful for what you went through?

Karl Marlantes

No.

Interviewer

Why not?

Karl Marlantes

Boy, that was a great question. Um, well first of all, I wouldnâ€™t be who I am without having gone through what I went through. That is hugely part of my personality. Thatâ€™s my identity.

Interviewer

Some of what you are has been extremely painful and destructive to other people andâ€”

Karl Marlantes

Yes, absolutely. Thatâ€™s part of who I am. And I like who I am. And so to be resentful about something that made me who I am, and I accept who I am, doesnâ€™t make sense to me.

Karl Marlantes

I was no victim. I mean, I could have stayed at Oxford. You know? I raised my hand. Now I highly resented the way we were treated when we came home. I still get on my high horse about that. And believe me, not all protesters spit on the troops, not even the majority. But it was a non-trivial minority and we were received very badly. Now that I have a lot of anger about.

Karl Marlantes

And I can get on my high horse about being lied to by the government. I mean when you find out that McNamara and all those people knew that the war was unwinnable and I canâ€™t remember what yearâ€”in â€™66 or somethingâ€”and how many dead Americans because they just wouldnâ€™t stand up and say this is wrong, we got to get out. That makes me mad.

Karl Marlantes

On the other hand, Iâ€™m at an age where I can understand that this man was terribly conflicted by loyalty, by not wanting to look stupid. Again an ordinary human flaws that in an ordinary life are meaningless, but if youâ€™re Secretary of Defense, or the President, you canâ€™t afford them. And unfortunately humans become President and Secretary of Defense. And generals and lieutenants and privatesâ€”itâ€™s all humans. And so Iâ€™ve arrived at a point where I donâ€™t get angry about the human condition. I get sad about it. Thatâ€™s a difference.

Interviewer

One of theâ€”I mean I think the novel in the end is a life affirming novel.

Karl Marlantes

It is. Definitely.

Interviewer

I found that to be the case. And I found that there is the persistence of almost a religiosity to the novelâ€”about this notion of compassion and humility.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah.

Interviewer

Did you intend that?

Karl Marlantes

Oh yeah. No, I mean all seven of the sacraments are in that novel, as Mellas develops his compassion. The whole point of it is that heâ€™s got to develop compassion. Heâ€™s got to learn when compassion trumps the rules. And thatâ€™s not easy to learn. And itâ€™s alwaysâ€”thereâ€™s no formula for that.

Karl Marlantes

You just have to be in that situation and say I think that the compassion answerâ€™s the right one. In other words, donâ€™t do the investigation and involve China and Mole in a court martial that would ruin their lives over a dead friend thatâ€™s dead anyway. And the compassion thing is to just drop it and not take the vengeance on Henry. You know who probably did it, butâ€”and, you know, it was covered up by the villains because they just didnâ€™t want to have it look bad on their record. And Iâ€™m off on a tangent, butâ€”

Interviewer

Well, to bring you backâ€”thereâ€™s a certainâ€”

Karl Marlantes

Oh, the religiosityâ€”yeah. And when Mellas is moving toward that, he goes through all seven of the sacraments as his spiritual side develops. So I was very conscious of that. The baptism scene where Cortel baptizes the kid in the river. Mellas is baptized; he falls in the water three times. And he stabbed his hand on his foreheadâ€”thatâ€™s the anointing of the water. When he is confirmed is when he joins the mystery tour group and the Chrism is the sardine oil, and he stabs it and heâ€™s anointed with it. When Hawk is ordained, Mulvaney claps him on the shoulder and says I donâ€™t want to act like a bishop. A bishop ordains a priest by clapping him on the shoulder. And Hawk goes regular, thatâ€™s the priesthood.

Karl Marlantes

And you know, last rites, I mean all those things are in that novel right up to the Eucharist at the very end. And I was always a little afraid that I might have beenâ€”might have overstepped it and made it too obvious, but very few people have picked up on that. So again, my theory is it reverberates. It reverberates with people because itâ€™s in our cultural psyche. Because even those religious symbols which are the sacraments, those are from way back, before Christianity was even inventedâ€”so deep in our psyches. So, yeah, itâ€™s a book about spiritual development and thatâ€™s a wholesome ending.

Interviewer

And for you was itâ€”are you recording an experience or are youâ€”was the writing of the book itâ€™s own way of coming to terms with the experience? Does that make sense to you?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah, no I doâ€”yeah. I think that the writing of the book was very important for me to develop. A lot of these characters that came out helped me understand people. I mean I was terribly angry with an officer who I thought was just terrible. Well he wasnâ€™t a great officerâ€”but my anger.

Karl Marlantes

When I started dealing with my villains, I began to see that they suffered the same flaws I suffered with. They were just put in positions of authority. Luckily when I was 22 years old, 23 years old and had all these flaws, I only had 43 guys under me. If you're the Secretary of Defense and you have the same problems, then it's real damage.

Karl Marlantes

And so I learned to sort of forgive that--through that--writing that book and through an experience that I had--a more religious experience, to see that they were just as trapped as I was. They were put into a position that was over their heads. They weren't--And so those people that were in over their heads, I kind of pulled the anger back and had more compassion. I'm sure that they probably lay awake at night and think of some of the--maybe not. Maybe they're still unconscious of it. Who knows?

Interviewer

Well, I think about--you know, I was thinking through the novel reminded me a little bit of the wonderful scene in the Wizard of Oz.

Karl Marlantes

That's interesting.

Interviewer

Where they pull back the--the dog pulls back the curtain--

Karl Marlantes

Right. Exactly right. Yeah, that's right. There he is manipulating all the--

Interviewer

He's an ordinary schmo, you know? Or a movie I found very compelling and I'm sure you saw it based upon what we were just talking about, but The Fog of War with Robert McNamara.

Karl Marlantes

Exactly.

Interviewer

Very similar in the sense that--well it has this feeling as though you--after watching some epic piece of theater and being wrapped up in these people on stage, you go backstage and there they are.

Karl Marlantes

There they are. Yeah.

Interviewer

They're just like somebody else you might pass on the street. Who might honk at you at the wrong moment, as you say.

Karl Marlantes

Exactly, yeah.

Interviewer

Right?

Karl Marlantes

Yeah.

Interviewer

And that's—first of all, that's the source of your compassion on some level. It's also the description of the elemental qualities of the experience. It's with all of us. It is historical. It will always be there.

Karl Marlantes

Yes.

Interviewer

No matter how much our—we seek, we solve our problems, we will always be at the same place in some respects.

Karl Marlantes

Yeah. I know. It's the human condition. You start off as a baby and you develop exactly the same way that a baby would have developed in Roman times or in cave times. It's the way that you—it's the way it is, the way it is. And yeah, I saw that. A lot of my friends who saw *The Fog of War* were angry and they were like, "Oh, McNamara, God! He was so out of touch," you know, and I went—"I didn't read it that way at all. I saw a man who was struggling very hard to come to terms with a part of his history where he now sees that he had made some errors.

Karl Marlantes

And again, if I'd have made the error of not wanting to look stupid, it wouldn't have hurt very many people at all. He was in a position where he couldn't afford that. But he was human, and so I had a lot of compassion for Robert McNamara in that movie. I don't—I didn't see him as an evil person. I saw him as a tragic person.

Interviewer

Well, thank you for the novel. Thank you for sitting for this interview today, and I hope we can talk to you again.

Karl Marlantes

Okay. Thank you.