In February 1992, the Village Voice asked me to write a review essay on Pat Barker’s World War I novel, *Regeneration*, which had appeared in Britain the previous year and was to appear that spring in the U.S. I readily agreed; I had read the novel and it moved and fascinated me. I decided to interview Barker at her home, outside Durham, in the north of England. So I took the train from London, where I was living at the time, and spent a resonant day in Barker’s company, talking widely about war’s impact on relations between men and women; about manliness and mental illness; about pacifism, brutality, and healing. We talked, too, about the unusual arc of Barker’s development as a writer. Most of the recorded section of our exchange appears below.

Why publish an interview that is now twelve years old? Two reasons: one to do with our present, war-torn zeitgeist; the other more expressly literary. September 11 and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have triggered—in Britain and, especially, in America—a preoccupation with questions of heroism, manliness, and honor, and with the woundings of war. These concerns stand at the center of *Regeneration* and at the heart of this interview. *Regeneration* is an especially powerful novel read against the backdrop of our times. It is, among other things, a novel of ideas that poses large questions, among them, What ideals of manhood make the conduct of war possible? What happens to soldiers who plunge through the gap between the official rhetoric of glorious, noble adventure and the savage violence (and savage tedium) they experience on the front line? What does it mean—and what would it take—to heal such men?
Veterans comprise one-quarter of America’s homeless men. In the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, we can expect another wave of returning soldiers (men and women) touted as national heroes yet abandoned to the ravages of mental illness, emotional instability, physical disability, and social isolation. Regeneration takes up the issues of war trauma, recovery, and reintegration with a rare force that is visceral yet psychologically complex, and achieves a contemporary resonance.

This interview, I believe, also helps illuminate the shape of Barker’s literary career. At the time, Barker’s work enjoyed a modest reputation. Regeneration was to become the novel that really put her on the map. (It remains her best-selling and most widely taught work.) Regeneration was also the first in what was to become her celebrated World War I trilogy, completed by The Eye in the Door (1993) and The Ghost Road (1995). The appearance of Regeneration not only garnered Barker a much larger readership and reputation, it also marked a major shift in the imaginative focus of her work. In the interview, she discusses this sudden shift in edifying ways.

The central characters in Barker’s prior novels—Union Street (1982), Blow Your House Down (1984), The Century’s Daughter (1986), and The Man Who Wasn’t There (1989)—had tended to be working-class women from England’s industrial north. Barker had grown up among such women; she possesses a fine ear for their diction, the intonation of their wit, their blunted dreams, and their survival skills. These qualities surface, above all, in the bleakly magnificent Blow Your House Down, a novel loosely inspired by Peter Sutcliffe’s serial killing of prostitutes and other women during the 1970s.

The women who populate Barker’s early novels lie outside the main currents of English literature. They are what Barker calls “voices that had not been listened to.” With Regeneration all that changed. My interview with her was largely stimulated by my curiosity about why, in her fifth book, she had broken so radically with her established haunts. What had prompted her to hazard a novel about people in every sense remote from her—young, male, upper-class First World War officers in an Edinburgh mental hospital?

The originality of Regeneration flows largely from Barker’s unorthodox decision to set her war novel not on the battlefront but in a military hospital, Craiglockhart, “a living museum of tics and
twitches,” where the shell-shocked were sent to be cured. The novel, a roman à clef, has at its center the pioneering psychologist, neurologist, and anthropologist Dr. William Rivers, who is stationed at Craiglockhart. Barker reimagines the intense relationship that evolved there between Rivers and his most renowned patient, the young poet Siegfried Sassoon.

To Rivers fell the melancholy task of restoring disturbed officers to “sanity.” Ironically, when he was successful, the “cured” officers would get sent back to the trenches that had undone them in the first place. Much of the novel’s emotional tension derives from Barker’s sympathetic exploration of Rivers’s paradoxical predicament. She explores, too, his conviction that war-damaged men needed to face and speak their fears. (By contrast, Rivers’s colleague, Dr. Lewis Yealland, saw breakdown on the battlefront as a sign of lapsed manliness and responded by subjecting his shattered patients to electric shock treatment.) Through Rivers, Barker dramatizes the crippling effects of emotional repression as a measure of manliness, a measure particularly pervasive during times of war.

Collectively, Barker’s novels reveal her singular gift for immersing readers in the atmospherics and pathologies of violence—whether rape, murder, trench warfare, torture, or unremitting confinement. Few novelists are so unsentimentally animated by people’s ability to chalk up small, shaky, but estimable victories over the most remorseless circumstances. As Barker observed in a recent interview, “The truth is, my major theme—of all my work—is recovery” (Poets and Writers Jan.-Feb. 2004: 37).

In a way that I could not have foreseen, spending the day in Barker’s company twelve years ago—interviewing her and talking more informally—was its own kind of gift toward recovery. The circumstances of the interview were unusual and, for me, emotionally charged. The day after I’d arranged to visit Barker, my father, whom I had not seen for several years, died in South Africa. The last thing I did before flying to the funeral was to phone Barker and postpone our meeting. On returning to London two weeks later, in mid-March, I straightaway boarded the train north to conduct the interview.

Death, war, mental breakdown, and the costs of male emotional mutism were for me, at that moment, so much more than literary themes. My father had fought with the Allies in World War II and
had suffered things in North Africa that he could never talk about. Now I’d lost the chance to have those conversations. My great-grandfather, who’d shared a house with us when I was small, had gone through a period of mental instability after he’d lost his son to World War I; again, an experience that he’d held tightly to his chest in painful silence. And I still had raw memories of visiting my beloved, younger, schizophrenic brother in a Craiglockhart-like South African mental hospital, where he was confined and had endured multiple episodes of electric-shock treatment.

I found, in Regeneration, and in Pat Barker’s company, something profound and balancing. Imaginatively and emotionally, the book and its author spoke my language. They gave me hope and they gave me understanding, leavened with exactly the right kind of humor. And, for a time, they gave me a place to put my grief.

Q. Could you talk a bit about your beginnings as a writer, how you set out?

A. I suppose I set out in a very tepid, tentative sort of way by writing short, middle-class novels which weren’t published and didn’t deserve to be. And that went on for some time. Getting favorable responses for the most part, but favorable rejections.

Q. This was in the seventies?

A. This was in the late seventies. Then I decided that I probably wasn’t going to be published, so I would write the book I wanted to write anyway, which I didn’t think could be published, which was Union Street. And for a time it looked as though I was quite right about that because a lot of the early responses to it were “Frankly, this is too bleak and depressing.” And then I sent it to Virago on the advice of Angela Carter and Virago wanted it. Actually, in the States it also had a rather slow start in the sense that it went to a lot of people and then eventually went back to Putnam because the editor Faith Sale found that she was still thinking about it some time later. So she asked me to send it back to her and that’s how it came out in the States.

Q. After Union Street, did you find that because you were dealing with marginal, extratraditional perspectives and voices you still
had problems breaking into the circuits of publishing and reviewing?

A. Not in the States at all. That went fairly well from the beginning. In this country, yes. I think in this country regional, working-class voices are very, very marginalized, and there’s a tendency either not to review the work or to review it in slightly different terms. So what they’re asking questions about is whether it’s authentic sociology, rather than looking at your themes or the way you’ve treated your characters. I don’t know what the answer to that is.

Q. Do you think that has changed at all over the past decade or since you set out? Do you see other writers working more confidently through those voices?

A. Just recently, I was on the radio with a woman called Livi Michael who has published a novel called *Under a Thin Moon* about working-class women on a council estate in Manchester. She’s been getting a lot of attention with that book, and I’m pleased for her because I think it is a good book. But I wouldn’t have thought it was easy even now.

Q. A number of reviewers have commented on your superb ear, your sense of dialogue. Was that something you had to struggle with because of these assumptions about publishing norms? Or were you fairly assured in your sense of dialogue from the outset?

A. I think I was fairly assured about the dialogue. The difficulty in writing a lot of dialogue interspersed with narrative is that the narrative voice can’t afford to be too far away from the voices of the characters; otherwise it really does sound like a social worker demonstrating these people.

Q. And it can open up all sorts of unintended satiric gaps.

A. Yes, it opens up a gap. So the authorial voice has to be very like the voices of the characters. But I think my voice, more than most people realize, is rather like the voices of the women I write about. I think in the sort of language they use, though I can think in other kinds of language if I’m forced to.
Q. I feel the strength of your dialogue carries through to *Regeneration*, a book which must have posed a very different set of challenges for you.

A. Yes, all those bloody dons sitting around tables talking about the theme of the book. Frankly, I think it's a doddle compared to writing about semiliterate or illiterate people, because you can actually have your character simply articulate what the book is about. It's money for old rope compared with what you have to do when the character can't possibly do that. It's a much less skilled business, whatever people may like to think.

Q. What prompted you to move in this direction? This wasn't the kind of writing you were associated with.

A. I think in this country, in particular, I felt I had got myself into a box where I was strongly typecast as a northern, regional, working-class, feminist—label, label, label—novelist. It's not a matter so much of objecting to the labels, but you do get to a point where people are reading the labels instead of the book. And I felt I'd got to that point. And also, I'd always wanted to write about the First World War. One of my earliest memories was of my grandfather's bayonet wound and his stories of the First World War. I knew I wanted to do that. I also knew I had to wait until I'd got a way of doing it that wasn't just a copy of what had already been done. It takes a long time to have an original idea about something which has got whole libraries devoted to it.

Q. So you'd started out working with a lack of precedent, and here you were dealing with an excess of precedent.

A. Yes, I hadn't thought of that, but that's absolutely true.

Q. People have talked about this book as extending your range quite considerably and as marking a shift in direction. But it also strikes me that there are a lot of continuities with the earlier work, particularly around the question of heroism—the acceptable and unacknowledged forms of heroism—going back to *Blow Your House Down* and *Union Street*. 
A. Once again, I hadn’t thought of that, but I think you’re right now that you’ve said it. Yes, it is about various forms of courage. What’s impressive about Sassoon’s courage actually is not just the obvious thing that it takes a lot of courage to get decorated, and that it takes a lot of courage to protest against the war, so he’s being brave in two distinct ways. In fact, it’s a much deeper form of courage than that because—partly because of his sexual makeup—he had a very deep need, I think, to be visibly tough and heroic and hypermasculine and prove he could do it. The bravest thing he does, it seems to me, is to deny that psychological need in order to protest against the war.

Q. I think one of the great strengths of the novel is the way it deals with the complexity of the condition of the pacifist-warrior rather than simply taking head-on the question “Is war good or bad?” It’s not an ethical book in that narrow, straightforward sense, but ethical by staging the dilemmas of that condition.

A. It’s not an antiwar book in the very simple sense that I was afraid it might seem at the beginning. Not that it isn’t an antiwar book: it is. But you can’t set up things like the Somme or Passchendaele and use them as an Aunt Sally, because nobody thinks the Somme and Passchendaele were a good idea. So in a sense what we appear to be arguing about is never ever going to be what they [the characters] are actually arguing about, which is a much deeper question of honor, I think. “Honor” is another old-fashioned word like “heroism,” but it’s very much a key word in the book.

Q. And manliness as opposed to, say, masculinity.

A. I know. And what’s so nice about them is that they use it so unself-consciously: they must have been the last generation of men who could talk about manliness without going “ugh” inside.

Q. I was wondering at what stage you had the idea of shifting your imaginative reflection on the war from the obvious site of the battlefront to the more oblique, hidden battlefront of the mental hospital. Was that something that came to you quickly, or as you were working through the book?
A. No, right at the beginning. That’s why I couldn’t write about the First World War before. I didn’t want to do it as a pseudocombatant’s book, though it can be done if you’ve got a certain kind of sensory immediacy to your writing. There are only so many kinds of sounds and smells and touches which together add up to the experience of trench warfare. But I wasn’t interested in doing that because it would have been an imitation. So I was very keen to have a book in which the actual viewpoint, the major viewpoint, was that of a noncombatant, which Rivers is, although he knows a lot more about the trenches than most noncombatants did.

Q. Which is in some sense a morally weak position from which to deal with the war issue.

A. It can be, yes. Especially when you’ve got the situation where part of the paradox of Sassoon’s position and, indeed, of Wilfred Owen’s, is that they are simultaneously condemning the war wholeheartedly and claiming for the combatant a very special, superior, and unique form of knowledge, which they are quite implicitly saying is valuable. That you cannot know what we know, and what unites us is something you cannot enter. If that is true, of course, then there is no reason for arguing against the war. We should want more and more men to be in it so they can have the benefit of this unique experience.

Q. I thought you pitted that well against Rivers’s anthropological authority, which is an authority of a totally different kind. Rivers himself is very uncertain about its value, it would seem.

A. There isn’t enough about Rivers as an anthropologist in the novel, but I just didn’t know how to get it in without dragging it in, quite frankly.

Q. I thought that subtheme complemented his neurological expertise quite effectively.

A. The actual societies of which Rivers primarily had experience were incredibly warlike. They were the sorts of societies where the chief occupation of the adult men was literally war or manhunting, for the purpose of war was to get heads.
Q. What period are we talking about?
A. The latest period when he was in Tonga was in 1914, another period that fascinates me, because these people were being decimated by the introduction of guns among other things. Their endemic warfare was actually not all that destructive until they had our weapons. And then they went on doing what came naturally, which was wiping each other out.

Q. An earlier moment in the arms trade’s exporting of violence.
A. Yes. And of course twenty men dead in an afternoon for a tiny little island was the Somme. And the white men were being terribly superior about this and tried to get the guns banned, saying they can’t live in peace and be civilized. But behind them there is this enormous tragedy already accumulating.

Q. How much did you find on Rivers? Obviously more people are familiar with what’s available on Siegfried Sassoon.
A. There’s a very short biography by somebody called Richard Slobodin. Rivers was a very secretive man. Immensely so. And even when he wasn’t being secretive, his handwriting was illegible. So he had two distinct ways of being discreet.

Q. Ideal for a fiction writer, his illegibility?
A. Yes, and a nightmare for a biographer.

Q. It is striking to me that even though Regeneration is not really a novel of ideas—the ideas are touched in very lightly—Rivers does voice some quite progressive views on relations between the sexes and on the destructive consequences of brittle, rigid gender identities. How much of that were you able to unearth in your research, and how much did you yourself fill in?
A. I think his basic insight that it wasn’t so much the horrors of the trenches as the passivity of the trenches that destroyed the men, and then linking that through to the higher incidence of hysterical breakdown in women in peacetime, especially
Victorian women who were forced to be so passive—that is definitely just Rivers. I think the whole tenor of his way of dealing with therapy, which was to express the emotion and not run away from it, is, of course, implicitly a questioning of Victorian ideals of manhood.

Q. Was he very alone in taking that approach to mental breakdown in the trenches?

A. Not entirely, I think. That was the general ethos, certainly at Craiglockhart. [Captain A. J.] Brock was doing a very similar thing. Not exactly the same, because he emphasized activities much more than Rivers did. But [William] McDougall in Liverpool, where Rivers was, and Elliot Smith, the anthropologist and neurologist, were doing the same thing with private soldiers. The opposite extreme, of course, was Lewis Yealland and his electric shock treatment, which was usually carried out on private soldiers. Almost invariably.

But there were a lot of therapies which depended very heavily on suggestion. Another therapy which I don’t deal with in the book was to put tubes of radium against the patient’s skull and hold them there, because they were impressed by radium: it was this magic thing and they had no idea of the dangers. But it glowed in the dark, so it must be doing you good. The patients actually did, to some extent, lose some of their symptoms. And the doctor, of course, who was doing all this shortly after acquired radiation sickness.

Q. I’ve never seen the analogy between mental breakdown in women during peacetime and men in the trenches posed in quite that way before.

A. Eric Leed does it in No Man’s Land, and Elaine Showalter does in her book The Female Malady. But I think it’s a perception that a lot of people have but don’t bring out, that in fact these men were leading extraordinarily passive lives, literally sitting in a hole in the ground doing as you were told or waiting to be killed. And this was the Great Adventure you’d gone marching off to expect.
Q. You get something of that in George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*—the ratio between passivity, boredom, and confinement on the one hand and the sporadic incidents of terror on the other.

A. It’s dangerous to compare violent criminals with soldiers, because in many ways I think they’re opposites, but apparently violent men who are habitually violent are also deeply passive people and rather defensive people. And I think there is a link between passivity and violence which is different from the link I suggested in *Regeneration*.

Q. Even in your early books—*Union Street* and *Blow Your House Down*—there’s a lot of emotional mutism in your male characters.

A. Yes, they aren’t allowed to say much. I think that’s mainly because I’m focusing on the women.

Q. Sure. But I think that one of the strengths of those books is that you look at the burden on the women of men’s emotional stuntedness or incapacities.

A. Yes, I think it’s still around to a large extent, though not confined to men. One of the remarks I got about *Regeneration* which interested me was from somebody who liked it but said, “Men used to have problems expressing their emotions, didn’t they?” For him, you see, it was unquestionably all in the past. It is for some, but when I think of some of the men I know, my God, they’d have their heads blown off before they’d talk.

Q. Even in contemporary wars—if you think of the Falklands-Malvinas or the Gulf War—there has been a glorification of the bottling of emotions for the good of the nation. So I would agree that the conditions which you talk about, while altered, are by no means past.

A. It was very interesting in the run-up to the Gulf War, when psychiatrists were talking, and some of the officers were obviously encouraging their men to talk about fear and accept that they were going to be afraid. But there were others who were pre-1914 in their attitude. There was one man, when the British lot were blown up,
who said: “A lot of you came out as boys. But I look around me now and I don’t see any boys.” The poor shell-shocked little devils, some of whom were only seventeen and had just seen their comrades blown up.

Q. There also seems to be a continuity with some of your earlier writing in terms of your profound empathy with young people who’ve been robbed of their childhood or youth, whether through rape, premature motherhood, or premature adulthood of one kind or another.

A. Yes, I think age in the book is very important. People asked me, “Did you find it very difficult to write about men?” Yet once you’ve taken the decision to do that, that’s not what keeps impressing you. But I was very much aware of being within a few years of Rivers’s age and of seeing these very, very young people more from his perspective. I think in a lot of writers, too, there is a damaged child who never gets a day older. And I think that’s possibly why we do it.

Q. Was there something autobiographical in that preoccupation with truncated childhood? Or was that something you saw in the people around you as you were growing up?

A. Oh, I think I grew up very quickly. The trouble is that, for various reasons, when you are doing it, because the natural urge of all children is to grow up, you’re actually rather pleased about it. It’s only later that you look back and say no, no that’s not what should happen.

Q. And then try to re-create it in other forms.

A. Yes.

Q. The way that surfaces in Regeneration around the class issue and the burden of responsibility on the young officers—their struggle to come to terms with such premature responsibility—is one of the most affecting elements in Regeneration. It’s both a psychological insight and a bit of wry social commentary that they’re plunged into premature motherhood in the trenches in ways people simply aren’t used to talking about.
A. All this faffing on about socks, and boots, and have they had a warm drink.

Q. And that's one of the things that the officers find hardest to cope with and are least prepared for.

A. Yes, because it's eliciting all the time those qualities which they've been told are not the qualities that as men they ought to be developing. And at the same time they're being asked to show this totally contradictory bloodthirsty quality. And, of course, Sassoon is marvelous at both. But I should think most of them are absolutely torn down the middle. It's an illogical role—you can't play that role.

Q. And how did you fit Sassoon's position as a poet into that?

A. I don't think in this book I did very much. I think it was a sub-theme, but I'm more and more interested in the way his poems and Owen's poems both claim a special status for the combatant and set out to be antiwar poems, because, as I mentioned before, it seems to me that there is a very important internal contradiction there. Sassoon himself became very dissatisfied with the kinds of poems he was writing. He didn't want to write angry poems anymore. But he never really found any other way of writing about the war other than through anger. And I think that he quite rightly saw that Owen was capable of another way of writing about it. But at the time, of course, the tentative movements Owen was making in that direction were not well received by the kind of people Sassoon could introduce him to, because they wanted resignation and the larger view. They weren't ready for that approach.

Q. Or ambivalence of any kind.

A. And Owen is all ambivalence—it's amazing.

Q. I think you touch on that, or imply it, in some of the women's comments on what the war has meant to them. There's one character—the wife of a batterer—who remarks that on August 4, 1914, peace broke out.
A. “The only little bit of peace I’ve ever had. No, I don’t want him back. . . . The Kaiser can have him for all I care.”

Q. And then there were the jobs the war opened up for women and the independence they could achieve.

A. For women who were not directly involved in grief—and of course there were many women who weren’t—it was the most amazing adventure, far more so than it was for the men, because they were actually expanding their scope, whereas the men expected to be doing that but in fact ended up with this very narrow, limited, dangerous role. I suppose it’s a reversal, because in peacetime women were pushed into this one role of wife and mother irrespective of their individual aptitudes or interests, whereas in wartime, of course, exactly the opposite is done. There is only one role for the man if he is young and healthy, which is the role of warrior. The variations of which men are capable are suddenly ignored.

Q. Blow Your House Down also sprang initially from a real-life set of incidents, around the Peter Sutcliffe case. But the two books must have been very different to research.

A. I didn’t do a lot of research for Blow Your House Down. In the north, we lived through the Ripper killings one by one, as they happened. At the time, apart from the fact that it was an ongoing news story, I wasn’t even particularly interested in it. Then I read an article about the individual women involved, including the twin sisters—we’re talking about heroism again really. They were identical twins and one of them was murdered and the police speculated that one of this man’s many kinks might be that if he saw a woman exactly like the woman he had killed he would want to go and do it again. So this woman paraded up and down the same area dressed in her sister’s clothes night after night. Obviously with a police guard, but a police guard that couldn’t have done anything. So she was being extraordinarily brave. And the other thing about that article that fascinates me is that there was the murder which was attributed to the Ripper which was in fact not by him—it was by somebody else. But they took one of the Victorian Ripper’s
victims and followed her last few hours and then this woman’s almost exactly one hundred years later, and beyond the fact that a pint of beer cost four pence and then suddenly it didn’t, you couldn’t tell which woman was which.

Q. But wasn’t there also the suggestion that one of the reasons the police took so long to track down Peter Sutcliffe was that they were plotting him against Jack the Ripper expectations, expecting too precise a recapitulation?

A. I’m not quite sure what their expectations were. I don’t think they expected him to be in a stable union.

Q. Was Blow Your House Down well received over here? My memory is that it was received quite well in the States.

A. Once again, I think, better received in the States than here. I think here it was perhaps too close to the Ripper killings. It wasn’t as close as people assumed, because the killer in the book is deliberately as unlike Peter Sutcliffe as possible. He’s not schizo—he’s a sadist—and the way he kills and what he does before he kills is totally unlike Peter Sutcliffe.

Q. You seem to return to variants of psychopathic figures, starting with the beginning of Union Street.

A. Yes, there’s a psychopath there. I think they’re emblems of violence, aren’t they, rather than actual characters. Although I want them to be convincing while they’re around. You would have to say that the link through the books is violence of one kind or another.

Q. And the imaginative effects on the victims of the existence of that violent figure . . .

A. And on the ways the victim responds to the violence, like the way Kelly [in Union Street] starts to identify with the killer. In a sense, she also becomes, in her little way, a violator because actually identifying with him is the only safe thing to do. I am quite fascinated by the ways in which people who are kidnapped, for example, respond, the way they become totally passive, totally
dependent, usually on the person who is trying to destroy them. It requires an enormous amount of strength of identity not to do that. Obviously Stephanie Slater [a British estate agent kidnapped and trapped in a bin for eight days in 1992], you see, coped extremely well. But a lot of people don’t, a lot of people just go passive and don’t escape even when there’s a clear opportunity to, because they’re afraid to escape.

Q. There are the related patterns of response to interrogation, where one’s captors employ alternating teams of aggressive and solicitous interrogators. This is something that happens in South Africa a lot, when the police detain somebody and the one day they’ll take them to a cricket match and the next they’ll beat them up. How people marshal their resources in coping with those circumstances varies so much.

A. We none of us know, do we?

Q. Until we’re there. I wonder if you could say something about the way the family features in your books. We’ve talked a bit about how, in Regeneration, you have the unorthodox forms of male mothering and the breakdown of those brittle divides between the sexes. It strikes me that there is an extraordinary range of mutilated or improvised families in your work.

A. Yes, improvised.

Q. Only mutilated if one assumes the norm of a one-up, one-down nuclear family.

A. I am interested in substitute parent-child relationships. There are an enormous number of those, beginning very unpromisingly with Kelly, who adopts this awful man as her father. And of course Rivers and Sassoon are the latest substitute father-son pair, which also has its dark side. And Liza and Stephen.

Q. Starting with the Kelly Brown incident in Union Street, you handle very skillfully the way people are left vulnerable by those attractions to substitute figures. You also probe the complex ways in
which they can unwittingly become complicitous in their own vic-
timization through this desire to make up for a lost parent.

A. To fantasize the parent. And if they’re very young, like Kelly,
it’s entirely luck who she ends up with. Less entirely luck who
Sassoon ends up with, but he is fantasizing too.

Q. As is Rivers.

A. Between Kelly and the man there is, on her side, this totally
father-daughter thing and, on his side, this totally sexual thing. But
between Rivers and Sassoon there’s the father-son thing but there’s
also the other, more erotic current going through which they both
hold in position. So it’s not just a substitute; it’s also a slightly sex-
ualized parent-child relationship.

Q. I think that comes through again in The Man Who Wasn’t
There—the boy’s voyeurism at the movies in relationship to his
desire for this missing figure. That book could in some ways be seen
as a transition into Regeneration.

A. Yes, it’s a pity it’s so short, in a way. It is a transitional book. It’s
still set entirely in the northern working-class area, but it’s transi-
tional in its method of treating the characters, I think.

Q. Returning to Regeneration, there were some noises about breach
of copyright. Were those resolved for the American edition? [In the
novel, Barker reproduced the statement of protest against the war
that Sassoon made before the House of Commons in July 1917.]

A. I’ve no idea, because the publisher took on the responsibility—
it’s no longer my nightmare, I’m glad to say. It became very com-
plcated, you know, because Sassoon’s declaration was read in the
House of Commons, and the House of Commons is not subject to
the law of copyright. Is that declaration then subject to copyright or
not? The answer—“If you’re quoting the House of Commons it isn’t
but in any other context it is”—doesn’t make any sense.

Q. We’ve covered a wide range of issues. Was there anything you
wanted to add at this stage?
A. It has been a very interesting discussion about *Regeneration*. The continuities you saw were much more subtle than most of the ones I’m conscious of. What differences do you see?

Q. Between *Regeneration* and the earlier work? Well, obviously your movement away from the northern, working-class women’s perspectives—as you say, probably the more difficult material to gain acceptance for. And then the challenge of entering voices that are so distant from your own. It seems as though initially in your work the challenge was to get voices that you were quite close to heard.

A. Yes, voices that were not listened to. Whereas by definition these men have been listened to. But then it’s also interesting to bring out a subtext in what people believed they were hearing.

Q. And one of the very strong subtexts in *Regeneration* is the effects of men’s ambivalent sexual identity on women who are adopting what are traditionally more masculine roles—women who are at least partly empowered through that shift in roles.

A. And the men who are adopting partly feminine roles and who for the most part are not empowered by them. Not out of inherent weakness; it’s just that the men are being asked to do something which is literally impossible to do.

Q. And they’re being asked to deny that they’re doing it. There’s an official denial that it’s a domestic occasion out there on the front line.

A. The other difference, of course, is that because I’m used to writing about my own backyard, I was, in the first books, very unaware of place. Because I was now writing about Edinburgh, it’s the first time that I’ve gone and actually researched a location. And that is fascinating. It makes me realize, paradoxically, how important place is in the other books.

Q. Where it was more instinctual?

A. Yes, it was more instinctual and therefore perhaps not in such sharp focus. But if you go to Craiglockhart, that building, with its
long, narrow corridors, it becomes a character inevitably, and you want to use it to keep the pressure on. It's a terrible place.

Q. What purpose is it used for now?
A. It's a polytechnic.

Q. Redesigned, one hopes.
A. They've lightened up the top corridors, because they've let south skylights in, but the second and third floors are still fairly dark. Dark corridors, small rooms, always overcrowded. It's still fairly massive and intimidating when you approach it.

Q. In the future, do you see yourself working along other lines?
A. I want to do a sequel to Regeneration. I want to look at this business of . . . Well, two things. Partly I want to look at who tells about the war and what they tell. On the one hand, you've got the war poets telling everybody the horrors as vividly as they can. But at the same time, in both Owen's and Sassoon's cases, refusing to say the other truth, which is that a lot of it those two particular men enjoyed. So you get an alternative area of silence developing, and that interests me.

The other thing that interests me is how in the second year of the war you had the increased persecution of the pacifists and the increased persecution of homosexuals. There were two very, very nasty campaigns going on. A lot of state spying of a very nasty kind. There was one poor woman, Alice Wheeldon, who was sent to prison with ten years' hard labor because a police spy alleged that she had plotted to kill Lloyd George by sticking a curare-tipped blowdart up through his shoe. This was a woman who kept a second-hand clothes shop in Leicester. And she got ten years' hard labor. Unlike Sassoon, you see, who didn't get sent to prison. You need to be working class and a woman to actually get yourself sent there.

Q. Certainly, the persecution of homosexuals in the context of "manly" wars hasn't gone away.
A. That hasn’t gone away. And the issue of telling about the war hasn’t gone away. I just think there’s a lot more to say about them both.

Q. If you think about the Vietnam War, the Falklands-Malvinas, the invasion of Grenada, the Gulf War—all that the media carefully left unseen and unsaid . . . There’s an intriguing book, actually, that has just come out in South Africa, by Jacklyn Cock. It’s called Colonels and Cadres and is about masculinity in the South African Defense Force and in the guerrilla armies. Cock talks about the place of women who are conscripted into the South African army and the structuring of their presence as a contrastive one. They’re not allowed to engage in the same activities as the men. They’re confined to the image of femininity in uniform, to remind the men of who they are and what they should be doing.

A. Of what they’re fighting for, unless they’re gay.

Q. So even though the women are in uniform, it is more like a finishing school—they create a backdrop for masculinity.

A. Yes, you can only dilute it if women are doing the same things, and there’s an incredible reluctance to allow that.

Have you read or watched Ian McEwan’s play The Imitation Game? He visits Bletchley Park where they were trying to break the Enigma code which governed the U-boats. As an image for the exclusion of women from war, he’s got this little girl who is quite a good code-breaker but isn’t allowed to do it, you see. And at the center there are these Oxford and Cambridge dons. It’s quite good. But in many ways it’s unfair. It’s an interesting example of the morals of using a historical character, because the central character is based on Alan Turing, who was the man who broke the Enigma code—if any one man won the Second World War, it was Alan Turing. And then he got arrested after the war for gross indecency and eventually took cyanide. In this play he’s represented in a way that Turing wasn’t, although the character is quite clearly Turing. But McEwan has used a different name, you see.

I thought of the pseudomorality of novelists, where you use a different name and then you’re allowed to say anything you like about
a person, whereas if you use the actual name you have the historian’s responsibility to be fair. I find that despite this dreadful word “faction,” I actually prefer that. You can’t say something terrible about Sassoon which is not true—not that I have wanted to. You couldn’t because you’re using the man’s name. If you’d called Rivers “Bridges” and Sassoon “Smith,” you could say anything you liked.

Q. That returns us to the question I posed at the beginning about just how insightful the historical Rivers was, given that his insistence on going against the grain of his age’s gender assumptions achieves such a current resonance.

A. It’s the tension, isn’t it, between not representing what they were actually interested in and yet at the same time bringing out the things that are of interest to us. I think that because of his sexual nature, again, he was rather insightful simply by being unable in the end to fit in with what he was apparently fitting in with. It’s a position where, if you’ve got any sensitivity or intelligence, you cannot avoid developing a certain kind of insight. I think he did. But in the end, of course, he was not prepared to act upon it to the extent of saying, OK, Siegfried, go and be a market gardener.

Q. That’s the poignant heart of the book—that Rivers is curing these men, only to render them fitter for war.

A. Yes, he’s restoring them to something he hates. He acknowledges that he’s doing what Yealland does. He’s doing it more gently, and more effectively in the long term, but that’s what he’s doing.