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An Interview with Eldon Thompson

Written by Seregil of Rhiminee

Thursday, 26 March 2009

Eldon Thompson is an American fantasy author. He has written *The Legend of Asahiel* trilogy and he's also involved in *The Elfstones of Shannara* film project.

Risingshadow.net has had the honour of interviewing Eldon Thompson about his fantasy trilogy and the film project:

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELDON THOMPSON

Hello Eldon and thank your for allowing Risingshadow.net to interview you. I know that you have a busy schedule, so it's great that you have time to answer our questions. We appreciate it very much.

PART 1: ELDON THOMPSON

For how long have you been interested in fantasy literature? What was the first fantasy novel you read?

I've had an affinity for fantasy literature since before I could even read. I say that because I was "reading" along with audio tapes of *Bible* stories when I was five years old. These were comic book adaptations for children, and I remember being awed by all the stories of courage, carnage, catastrophe, and mayhem. I loved that these humble heroes were able to go forth and accomplish such amazing feats with a sense of righteous indignation against evil – often armed with little more than faith in themselves or whatever higher power they believed in.

As far as novels, the earliest books I remember reading that could be deemed fantasy were the "Oz" books by L. Frank Baum. I had a set of fourteen of them that ended in *Glenda of Oz*, if I'm not mistaken. After that, it was *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, which led me to *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, the *Prydain Chronicles* by Lloyd Alexander, and just about every major fantasy series that has come along since.

What are your favourite fantasy novels?

If you're looking for titles, my all-time favorite is still *The Elfstones of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks. In high school and college, I devoured all of R. A. Salvatore's "Drizzt" books as they were released, and still enjoy the earlier sets (*The Icewind Dale Trilogy* and *The Dark Elf Trilogy*) the best. These days, I'm in awe of George R. R. Martin's work with *A Song of Ice and Fire*, my favorite thus far being the second book, *A Clash of Kings*.

Basically, I enjoy epic adventures filled with both action and intrigue. I'm not much interested in fighting for fighting's sake. There should be a purpose behind it and emotional ramifications because of it. If the author can surprise me by turning good guys into bad guys (and vice versa), having plans go awry, or revealing secret plots that have been properly foreshadowed ahead of time, so much the better. Oh, and I have to care about the characters. If I don't, then none of the rest will matter.

Have you always wanted to be a writer? What was your inspiration for writing fantasy?

I remember asking my dad to teach me to read – for the express purpose of being able to write my own stories. By the Second Grade, teachers were assigning short writing assignments, no more than a page or two. I would go home and write thirty pages, complete with chapters and illustrations. Before I'd moved on to middle school, I'd completed a 500-page manuscript entitled "Revenge of the Lava Lizards," along with numerous stories ranging from adventure to horror, science fiction, and comedy.

Early on, my primary inspiration for writing fantasy were the works I'd grown up with, such as *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and so forth. Later on, after dabbling in other genres, I came to realize that "fantasy" was the least restrictive genre out there. By that I mean there were no limits except those of my own imagination. I could make up any rules I wanted, so long as I didn't break them. And I could write elements of war, adventure, mystery, romance, comedy, horror, et cetera, wrapped all up in one. Lots of genres incorporate bits and pieces of others, but it seems that fantasy is the most inclusive. That sense of freedom is the main reason I prefer to write fantasy today.

PART 2: THE LEGEND OF ASAHIEL

How did you come up with the idea of writing "The Legend of Asahiel"?

I'd blame it on illegal drugs, but I don't think that would work, since I've never used any.

No, *The Legend of Asahiel* came about bit by bit as I looked at all of the epic fantasy stories out there and began to make note of all of the most common conventions. How many times have we read about the orphaned farm boy who's really a sorcerer or king? The evil being who wants to turn all the world to ash? The kindly wizard whose only purpose is to educate the young hero before being killed? The damsel in distress whom the hero falls in love with and who must be saved in the end? The monstrous dragon, the wicked temptress... the list goes on and on. More and more, those stereotypes began to bother me in that so many of them seemed patently unrealistic. Fantasy is by definition an escape from reality, but it should still be believable.

So what I set forth to do was write a story that would incorporate all of the most commonly used conventions, only to point out how absurd many of those conventions really are. By asking myself, "What would be most likely to happen in such a situation?" I gradually crafted the characters and storylines that comprise this particular series. I won't spoil it for new readers by going into a line item detail, but let's look for example at perhaps the most common convention out there – that in some alternate world, there's a "Chosen One" of prophecy destined to save it. Is that how it works? When the U.S. was struck by terrorists on 9/11, did Superman come flying out of the sky to save the day? No. The heroes were those ordinary individuals of extraordinary courage who risked or even sacrificed their lives to help save others. They didn't do so because they were gifted with some supernatural power or talisman that the rest of us lack. They did so because circumstance happened to call upon them, and they chose to step forward and meet the challenge because it seemed the right thing to do.

Of course, what we think is right and what is right don't always go hand in hand, no matter how noble our intentions. Even "heroes" make mistakes. Hmm, I'm sensing a theme here....

What can readers expect from "The Legend of Asahiel"?

I'm always reluctant to answer this sort of question, because I'd rather readers draw from the story what they will, without any preconceived notions I might impose upon them. But since I already did a little of that in answering the question above, and because I myself seldom walk into books or movies completely blind to what they're about, here goes...

At first glance, readers can expect an epic fantasy story very much like any of the giant ones come before. Think Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Brooks's *Shannara*, Jordan's *Wheel of Time*, Goodkind's *Sword of Truth*, Williams's *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*, and a dozen others like them. Yes, there are stylistic differences between such tales, but the basic tenets are the same. Like these, *Asahiel* is a coming-of-age adventure as a young group of heroes is faced with the unenviable task of defending their world against opposing forces who wish to claim it. There are divine talismans, mythical races, demons, dragons, witches... heck, I pretty much threw in every major fantasy element I could think of.

However, nothing turns out to be quite what it seems upon introduction. The "evil" characters have legitimate gripes. The "good" ones make flawed decisions and argue with one another about who is to blame or what might have been done differently. While it's essentially a holocaust tale and is therefore serious in tone and style, observant readers should detect a sardonic undertone throughout. The farther one reads in the trilogy, the less common and clichéd the story will seem, as the twists become darker and less standard than what many epic fantasy readers have come to expect. Or so I've been told.

My goal was to write a story with the adventure of a Terry Brooks book, the action of an R. A. Salvatore book, and some of the intrigue and subversive nature of a George R. R. Martin book. Like the works that inspired it, the writing is thick and descriptive, designed to keep readers busy for weeks rather than days, or days rather than hours. There are long journeys, battles big and small, and a concentrated focus on how these events affect the characters emotionally. Oh, and beware of unreliable narrators. Just like in our world, there are many different viewpoints, and none have the full and complete truth.

PART 3: THE ELFSTONES OF SHANNARA FILM PROJECT

I've heard that you're involved with the forthcoming fantasy film "The Elfstones of Shannara", which is based on Terry Brooks' classic fantasy novel. What can tell us about this project?

I can tell you what Warner Bros has announced: that Mike Newell has signed on to produce and direct, and that the story is presently in development.

Aside from that, I can really only speak to the origins of the deal. First of all, Terry wrote a wonderful book, beloved by millions. Like many fans, I wondered why a film hadn't been made. I wrote a letter to Terry through his website, asking if he was opposed to the idea of Hollywood tackling his material. He wasn't. He was merely skeptical. With his permission, I wrote a screenplay adaptation, seeking to show studio execs that this nearly 600-page book could in fact be faithfully retold on the silver screen. With Terry's further permission, I began to show the finished script to folks here and there around Hollywood, knocking on doors where I could... and mostly getting them slammed in my face. After seven years of this, off and on, during which I was writing my own books, I was introduced to a young manager who had the industry connections I lacked. Terry agreed to let he and I present the script and the series of books on which it was based to majors studios and producers. Interest was high enough that, after several near misses, an acceptable option agreement was finally hammered out, and here we are.

None of this means that a *Shannara* film will necessarily be made anytime soon. I for one believe it is an inevitability – a matter of when, not if. If WB drops the ball, someone else will pick it up. My biggest hope is that the film be done right, meaning that it is of high quality and does not deviate from the story as Terry envisioned it except where absolutely necessary given the restrictions of the film medium. Until Hollywood is sure it can do this well, I'd rather not see them do it at all.

Can you tell us why you decided to get involved in "The Elfstones of Shannara" instead of "The Sword of Shannara"?

They say you only get one chance to make a first impression, and that's never truer than it is in Hollywood. If the first film in a planned sequence isn't successful, then you don't get to make the rest. At best, if the sequels are shot concurrently, they'll get dumped straight to DVD. More likely, they'll never see the light of day at all.

Elfstones is the first Terry Brooks book I ever read. For that and other reasons, it's also my favorite. As much as I enjoyed *Sword* after going back and reading it, the story does not feel quite as tight or have the same shocking, bittersweet ending that *Elfstones* has. If I could see only one *Shannara* story onscreen, I would choose *Elfstones*. So that's where I focused my efforts. Since the first three books are standalone volumes, I don't think the reading/viewing order is critical. I would recommend reading them in order, of course, but since it didn't hurt my enjoyment to read the *Elfstones* book first, why would it hurt my enjoyment to watch an *Elfstones* film first? Like they did with the *Godfather* films, a producer could very easily tell the story of one generation (Wil Ohmsford), then go back and tell the story of his progenitors (Shea and Flick Ohmsford).

I would love to see a film version of *Sword*. And there's little I wouldn't give to be involved in making it happen. Heck, if I had the money to do it myself, I would shoot *Sword*, then go on to shoot *Elfstones* and *Wishsong* and all the rest no matter what the box office results. I'd cast Liam Neeson in the role of Allanon, find talented unknowns for most of the other roles, employ a proven director who loved the books as well as I, and consult on every major decision with Terry himself. But moviemaking is an expensive proposition, and I simply don't have the resources required to follow out this particular fantasy. Working within the system as it exists, this was the best I could do.

PART 4: FUTURE PLANS ETC.

I'm sure that your readers and fans would like to hear about your future projects. Are you going to write more fantasy novels in the near future or do you have other plans?

Plans have a way of changing on us, so, beyond breakfast, I try not to set anything in stone. My hope is absolutely to continue writing novels (published or unpublished) until they pry the pen out of my dead hands. I spend a lot of time writing or pitching screenplays these days, several of which are getting closer to production. And if I were to hit a \$100 million lottery jackpot, you can bet my first order of business would be to turn focus to the *Shannara* film franchise. But I imagine my greatest love will always be novel-writing, and while my *Legend of Asahiel* trilogy is complete, I have several story ideas I'm developing that are staged in that world. In fact, I'm currently writing an outline and sample chapters for a spin-off series featuring Kylac Kronus, a fan-favorite assassin character from the *Asahiel* books. I'll be pitching that idea to my agent and editor soon, and hope that they like it well enough to give me the green light. It'll be of a somewhat different style than *Asahiel*, more akin to Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. But it'll still be a fantasy setting, with swords and creatures and plot twists and peril at every step.

Oh, and I also need to get a haircut.

Is there anything you'd like to say to your readers and fans?

Just thank you, really. It's the faith and support of readers that allows me to do this for a living, for which I am supremely grateful. I wrote for many years without any external reward whatsoever. And if it came to it, I would do so again. For any aspiring writers out there, that's probably the first bit of advice I would pass along: Write because you love to do so, and not in search of fame and fortune. Should the latter find you, consider it a bonus.

Oh, and if anyone out there has any books to recommend, please look me up and let me know. Because I'm still a reader and fan myself, always looking for the next great adventure....

Thank you for the interview, Eldon. I wish you good luck with your future projects.

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