A Dribble of Ink

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Interview | Eldon Thompson

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Eldon Thompson, the author of The Crimson Sword, The Obsidian Key and the upcoming The Divine Talisman, is making waves right now in the entertainment business by having his named attached to the newly announced Shannara movie that is being produced by Warner Bros.. Thompson, best known for Fantasy novels, is a good friend of mine and agreed to come along to A Dribble of Ink and talk about the movie deal, his novels, writing and a whole lot more.

Eldon wasn't afraid to get into the nitty gritty of my questions, so I advise you to find a comfy chair, grab a bowl of popcorn and settled in! Eldon's got a lot of great things to say and I know you're not going to want to miss it!

The Interview

Q. Eldon, first off I would like to welcome you to A Dribble of Ink and thank you for taking the time out of your no-doubt busy schedule!

Don't mention it. Every now and then, such diversions come as a pleasant surprise. This is certainly one of those.

Q. The big news of the moment is that Warner Bros. has recently optioned the rights to Terry Brooks' Shannara Series and production on the movie is moving forward already! How did you first get involved with the product and why did Warner Bros. initially decide to purchase your script for The Elfstones of Shannara?

Hmm, this could take awhile. As anyone familiar with Hollywood can attest, the deal-making process is often as epic an undertaking as the actual production, unfolding in several stages over a number of years. If you start nodding off, let me know…

I first became involved with this back in 1999, while studying screenwriting at UCLA. At that time, I was not only struggling with the rigid demands of the screenplay format, but was still learning a great many things about how to execute basic story structure. I understood how these things were supposed to work, but the application of it was proving to be a greater challenge. After writing a couple of scripts that I wasn't particularly happy with, I decided to eliminate one of the variables by adapting a proven story into screenplay form. That way, I could get a handle on the format without simultaneously struggling with character, plot, and all of those other pesky elements of storytelling.

Since I was focused at the time on fantasy, I thought I'd start with my longtime favorite: Terry Brooks's The Elfstones of Shannara. So I wrote Mr. Brooks a letter, asking for permission, explaining that I had no intention of shopping the property, merely using it as a personal exercise. Terry kindly replied that, so long as I understood I had no claim the underlying material, he supposed it would be all right.

Well, the script turned out better than even I had imagined. I'd like to take credit for that, but the simple truth is that Terry's story fit the traditional cinematic structure well, there was very little tweaking I had to do. In looking at it afterward, I could think of no reason why this shouldn't be a blockbuster film—unless, of course, Terry himself was opposed to seeing his work on the silver screen. So I contacted his representatives to make sure the film rights were currently available, then wrote Terry another letter, gauge his interest. As it turned out, he wasn't opposed to the idea, just skeptical of it. (This was prior to the release of Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings, mind you, so, i the eyes of many, Hollywood had yet to prove that it could produce an epic fantasy of this magnitude in a manner that did justice to the source material.) Terry indicated tha provided I went through all of the proper professional channels, I was welcome to prove him wrong.

I spent the next several years working primarily on my own novels. My studies took me to the Maui Writers Conference, where, year after year, I learned from the likes of Elizabeth George, John Saul, Dorothy Allison, Ben Bova, and Terry Brooks himself. Each summer, upon meeting with Terry, I would inform him of any inroads I had made with regard to my Elfstones adaptation, and make sure that he was still okay with me using it in order to draw interest to his work. As exasperated as he must have felt at times, h never exhibited anything to me but patience and continued support.

Finally, in 2005, I signed on with a Hollywood manager, Dan Farah, who looked at Elfstones and agreed that it should be a "slam dunk." Terry and his representatives were kind enough to provide us with an agreement that granted us the exclusive shopping rights for a limited time. With what essentially amounted to a free option, we put togeth a pitch packet centered around my Elfstones adaptation—which by now had been reviewed by Terry himself—and set forth to find a buyer.

I've since learned, of course, that there's no such thing as a "slam dunk" in Hollywood. However, we kept at it until we found a co-financier who took the project in to Warner Bros—at which point, an offer was extended and negotiations began.

Believe it or not, that's an abbreviated version of how the deal came about. At full length, I could easily write an entire book on this subject. As for why Warner Bros optio my script, well, you'd probably have to ask them. My manager and lawyer handled the actual negotiations, along with a nudge now and then from Terry's camp, which was bi

hammering out a deal for the underlying rights to the books themselves. I'd like to think that WB bought the script because they consider it to be a faithful adaptation of Terr work, and am hoping that they won't feel the need to deviate too radically from it in either development or production. To be honest, however, it's likely too soon to tell wh their precise intentions are. As you might imagine, after spearheading this endeavor for the past eight years or so, I'm quite sensitive to how the project is handled. But if Te is willing to take that leap of faith, there's only so much fuss I can make. It's his baby, not mine.

Q. Fans of the Shannara series might find it curious that you decided to adapt The Elfstones of Shannara instead of Brooks' first novel, The Sword of Shannara. Can you explain why you decided to start with his second novel instead of his first?

Sure. In the beginning, it was simply a matter of favoritism. As I described earlier, I began this endeavor as an exercise in screenwriting. Elfstones was my favorite book, and a shorter, tighter read when compared to Sword. Sword, I felt, would be much harder to adapt, and, quite frankly, I wasn't up to the challenge at the time.

After Elfstones was written, I considered tackling Sword, but one of the things you'll hear all the time as a screenwriter is that you should not even think about sequels until the first film proves to be a success. Yes, Elfstones came after Sword. But one of the criticisms Terry has faced over the years is that Sword is strikingly similar to Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. One could argue that this is a good thing. In fact, Terry's editor, Lester del Rey, championed and highlighted these similarities, as discussed in Terry's non-fiction memoir, Sometimes the Magic Works. However, the Rings films were already in production, and, even back then, I was told repeatedly that no studio was going to touch a film like Rings unless Rings itself proved highly successful. (And it did, of course, after which, I was immediately told that no studio was going to touch a film like Rings for fear of looking pale in comparison. Go figure. While Hollywood doesn't seem to mind copying the same story template over and over in the genres of horror, romantic comedy, and so forth, it seems to think that Rings cornered the market on the entire genre of epic fantasy. Granted, the book world once felt the same way, before Terry and Lester del Rey came along to prove everyone wrong, but that's a rant for another day.)

Point is, Sword had a number of elements working against it before it ever got out of the chute. Too long, too many characters, too many subplots, and too similar (on the surface, at least) to Lord of the Rings. Knowing that we might get only one shot at a Shannara film, it made little sense to me to start by handcuffing ourselves with such baggage right out of the gate.

On the bright side, one of the big selling points of Terry's original Shannara books is that the first three (Sword, Elfstones, and Wishsong) are standalone volumes. As such, y really could tell them in any order, without necessarily committing to producing all three. For many Shannara fans, Elfstones is their favorite. Its storyline is not really dependent on the others. I had already experienced this firsthand while reading, since Elfstones was the first Shannara book I ever came across. After finishing it, I immediate went back and read Sword. But at no point was I lost, confused, or bored while reading Elfstones prior to Sword. And if that was true of the books, why couldn't it be true of potential films, as well?

It's been an ongoing debate that has yet to be settled with 100% certainty. However, the studio execs, the producers, and—most importantly—Terry himself have all agreed thus far that Elfstones is the strongest starting point with regard to a successful film franchise. The hope, of course, is that this will be a franchise, on par with those of Star
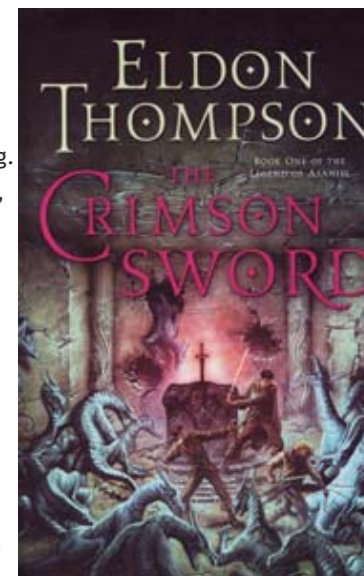
Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and others. If such is the case, we will likely see a film version of Sword at some point down the road. It just doesn't seem to be th story that the majority of Shannara fans are most excited about. And in Hollywood, you can't afford to hold anything back.

Q. Most of your fans probably consider you a novelist first and a scriptwriter second, but your web page mentions that you studied "screenwriting at UCLA, where [you had hopes of bringing a worthy fantasy to the silver screen." What is it that initially drew you to screenwriting and how has it affected your career as a novelist?

I'd have to say that those fans are correct. I started out writing books, and I think it's safe to say that books will always be my first love. When I initially turned my attentic to screenwriting, I did so out of frustration as much as anything else. By that time, I had read a lot of epic fantasy, which is what I most wanted to write. But everything I cou come up with seemed blatantly derivative of stories that had already been published. So I stopped reading fantasy for awhile, hoping to clear my head of others' ideas. Probl was, when I started reading it again, I found that my work was still similar to the works of others. Evidently, I was being derivative without even realizing it.

I ultimately decided that I simply had nothing new to add to the genre of epic fantasy, which had been covered so well by the likes of Tolkien, Alexander, Lewis, Brooks, Eddings, Jordan, Salvatore, and countless others. In the mid nineties, however, most people still believed that no one had yet made a really good fantasy film. For every Con the Barbarian, Beastmaster, or Willow, there was a Conan the Destroyer, Beastmaster II, or Kull the Conquerer. And even the "good" fantasy films, like the aforementioned Willow, were derided by many critics and considered box office disappointments. Fantasy was dubbed the "F-word" in Hollywood, and avoided like the plague. With the rise special effects, however, I felt the time was drawing nigh. All Hollywood needed, I thought, was a decent story. (Hey, no one ever said that I wasn't young and naïve.)

So off I went to UCLA, to learn the craft of screenwriting from the best in the business. In my mind, fantasy needed only to be treated earnestly, no different than historica epics like Braveheart or Gladiator—with the exception of including dragons and sorcery and elves and other such supernatural fare. I'd say that Jackson's take on Tolkien's Lo of the Rings proved me right, though I had nothing whatsoever to do with that. Further hits like Narnia and Harry Potter continue to demonstrate fantasy's commercial streng While Hollywood still has an annoying habit of dumbing stories down to the lowest common denominator, the genre's future in film, I'd say, has nothing but upside.

As far as affecting my novel writing, I'd say that the impact has been overwhelmingly positive. Screenwriting is structure oriented—rigidly so. But that structure is not so different from the general structure that any story should employ. Knowing how to assemble a story for the screen has proven invaluable in helping me to plot out my novels, giving me the skeletal framework of events to build upon. It has taught me how to maximize conflict and maintain tension. It has taught me how to give life to characters wit but one or two memorable traits. Most importantly, perhaps, it has taught me to simplify things—to toss out ideas that are too complex and to really focus on the emotional response of characters to whatever obstacles are thrown at them. Dialogue and description should live in balance, and neither should be allowed to slow or detract from the main story. That which is not said, but revealed through physical expression, often speaks louder than the words themselves. These are all lessons one learns when studying creative writing, but they are absolutely enforced when it comes to writing for the screen. Quite simply, in a movie, there isn't time for those long speeches and clever aside that books so often employ. And while the expanded richness of subplot and subtext is, to me, one reason "the book is always better," I think it's good to keep in mind that y don't want audience members checking their watches, so to speak—whether they're sitting in a crowded theater or in a nice comfy reading chair at home.

All of which is easier said than done, of course. But knowledge is half the battle. Or is it that you're not supposed to swim on a full stomach? Something to that effect.

Q. What can readers expect when they finally settle into the theatre seating to watch the first Shannara movie?

Your guess is probably as good as mine. There is still such a long way to go. All I can guarantee right now is that the adaptation I wrote is extremely faithful to the source material. If I thought Shannara (and particularly Elfstones) needed to be reinvented in order to work on film, then I never would have undertaken the project in the first place would have adapted some other story instead—or else started from scratch with one of my own. There may be a subplot or two that will have to be eliminated or abbreviated There are expository scenes (councils and histories and what-not) that I feel the film could do without. All in all, the story must be simplified, pared back to its core premise and theme, and reassembled from the ground up with only those elements that most closely reinforce what it's truly about. But I see no reason to eliminate or reimagine any the principal characters or events that made the book what it is. I am hoping, like most fans, to see scenes from the novel come to life onscreen as Terry imagined them. To me, that's the goal of an adaptation: to capture the author's vision as closely as possible. I say that because no two readers can picture a story in exactly the same way. Unlil books, films create a definitive image for the audience. No matter what goes on screen, millions of readers will be saying: "That's not quite how I envisioned it." As long as it close to the source material, however, fans will have little room to complain. What they hate is being told there wasn't room for this-or-that great scene from the book wher half the film was filled with scenes from someone else's imagination. Their response to that is always: "Well, if they cut out all the added junk, there would have been room.

I don't mean to bash the collaborative nature of filmmaking. I do understand and have great respect for the process. I enjoy seeing the various impressions a work evokes ir others. But Terry has been telling stories to great acclaim for a long time. He knows more about them than me, you, and a dozen Hollywood executives put together. So I trul hope that the creatives in charge are able to see that there is no need to go out of their way to put their own stamp on the Shannara brand. Whatever deviations they might think are "cool" will not necessarily be received by other viewers the same way. The best bet is to adhere to the book until some aspect of filmmaking (time, budget, schedu weather, etc.) forces them to do it another way. I say this so often these days that it feels like my personal mantr "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Even in such cases, I personally would consult with Terry to see what his thoughts are on the potential solutions. So long as the powers-that-be are willing to do the same, I'll maintain a largely optimistic view of this movie project. Because if Terry is happy with it, there's a good bet that his many fans will be, too.
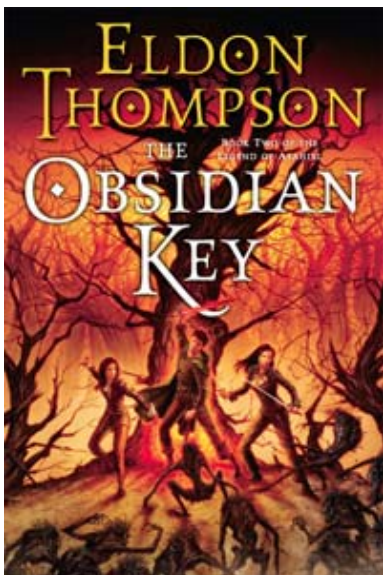
Q. Both screenwriting and being a novelist are big commitments, how do you find the time to balance your writing career betwee your novels and your growing career in film?

Ha. Still working on that one. It's definitely a juggling act, at times—and if juggling writing projects was like juggling chainsaws, I'd have hacked myself up long ago.

Good news is, the two forms differ enough that the one offers a respite from the other. Novel writing can be a long, lonely process. With screenwriting, on the other hand, I can tell a story much more quickly, with no end to the creative input offered by others. (I guarantee you, while there aren't too many folks out there who would presume to tell the director or editor or caterer his business, everyone and his dog—the caterer included—is ready and willing to give notes to the writer.) Writing a novel allows me to stretch my le a bit in terms of narrative description, which can be fun, but can also become a headache. In screenwriting, narrative description is ke to a bare minimum, because it is the job of someone else (concept artist, set designer, cinematographer, stunt coordinator, costume designer, fight choreographer, product placement staff, etc.) to fill in those particular details. Spend a few months writing a novel, an working on a script will feel quite refreshing. Spend a few weeks writing a script, and going back to working on your novel will feel equ refreshing.

Another benefit I've found is that taking time off in between drafts of a certain project allows me to return to that project later with a clearer, more detached view. This greatly benefits the editorial process, as it reduces the chance of "losing the forest for the trees." And since I'm still writing something else in the interim, it's not like my writing skills are completely going to rust. Jumping back and forth between projects in the middle of a story would drive me nuts, but, luckily, I've been able to work so far c what I want when I want, meaning that I don't often have to step away from something and switch gears until I get to a good stopping point.

Regardless, I have very little life away from the writing desk. If I'm not here, I'm at the gym. If I'm not at the gym, I'm here. Fortunately, there aren't many places I'd rath be.

Q. Your novels follow a similar structural style as many classic trilogies (such as the original Star Wars movies). The first novel, The Crimson Sword, stands on its own a novel, with most of the major plot lines tied up, but its sequel, The Obsidian Key leaves the reader with a much bigger cliffhanger leading into the final novel, The Div Talisman. What is it about this classic structure that initially appealed to you?

Being told that the advance for three books is generally larger than the advance for just one?

I'm kidding, of course. Mine is a trilogy in the Aristotelian sense, yes, where each book, while a three-act story in and of itself, also serves as one of three acts in a larger, overall story arc. The reason part two feels like a cliffhanger is because, as Act II, it ends at the trilogy's darkest moment, when all hope appears lost. I mean, by the end of Empire Strikes Back, we've seen the Rebels scattered and harried across the galaxy, C-3PO blown up, Han Solo encased in carbonite, and Luke Skywalker's hand amputated— after he has been lied to by his mentor about his father's true identity. Not a whole lot there in which to take heart.

This classic structure appealed to me for a number of reasons. One was familiarity. I'd studied it in college and witnessed it again and again with stories like Star Wars—whi happened to be one of my all-time favorites. Second, part of me was frustrated with the term "trilogy" having become misrepresented and overused. These days, any group c three stories is called a trilogy, regardless of how they might—or might not—tie together. While I'm far from what anyone would consider an elitist, I thought I'd remind reade out there of the form a true trilogy is supposed to take. I mean, it was defined that way with a purpose: chiefly, for the way in which it manipulates the reader's emotions al that time-tested story arc.

The third and biggest reason for employing the Aristotelian structure, however, goes back to the nature of the story I wanted to tell. I spoke earlier about what a difficult time I had in devising a new take on the epic fantasy quest. For awhile, I was so determined to come up with something "original" that my stories became an esoteric mess of worlds within worlds, alternate realities, and other such elements that would not make sense to anyone but me—and maybe a quantum physicist. That's the trouble with originality. If something comes along that is truly original, then, by definition, how can anyone else be expected to relate to it? In storytelling, the challenge is to be the same yet different, to devise a story that is at once familiar and at the same time fresh and exciting. Several instructors finally managed to hammer this point home through my th skull. Readers don't care about some nebulous cosmos. They care about problems and challenges and difficult choices to which they can relate. If I was to write an epic fanta then I was advised to follow the tried-and-true coming-of-age format, and trust in my own voice to make it "unique."

The way I decided to attack this was to take a deconstructionist approach to the most classic (i.e. overused) conventions of the epic fantasy quest. Having read and studied many of these tales, I was well aware of their various components and devices. Quite frankly, many of those conventions never sat quite right with me. The ideas of prophecy and destiny and orphaned saviors and artifacts of power and love at first sight with the first damsel encountered in the Extraordinary World… so much of that has always stru

me as patently unrealistic. I enjoyed the stories, of course. And I recognize that "realistic fantasy" could be viewed an oxymoron. Nevertheless, I wanted to see if I could tell story that would seem to follow that classic structure… only to tear it all down and rebuild it in unexpected fashion. After all, the best way to surprise someone is through the proper use of misdirection: leading your readers to assume one thing before turning the tables on them in a believable, satisfying way.

To deconstruct something, you first have to clearly establish what it is you're trying to reinvent. The Legend of Asahiel, then, was set from the beginning to follow the class Aristotelian trilogy structure. Book One, The Crimson Sword, tells a coming-of-age adventure story that should feel familiar to anyone who has read this kind of novel before. a literary sense, it takes a number of small jabs at some of those conventions I referenced earlier, but nothing so drastic as to bring the entire framework tumbling down. By end of Book Two, the story has taken some drastic twists, letting readers know that this is not the classic adventure as they have come to expect it. Book Three, hopefully, w bring with it a few final curveballs and serve to justify any and all of the more dubious story choices I made during the trilogy's first two acts. If not, at least there's a lot of bloodshed.

Q. You've mentioned a couple of times that you struggled early on with trying to write a fantasy novel that wasn't derivative of all the other works out there. Is there reason you continued to stubbornly stick to the genre and not attempt to tell your story in another genre? Did you ever deviate and perhaps attempt write a Martian Ic story set in the midst of a gangster-era New York?

Actually, yes, I did try other genres, though nothing involving Mars or New York. While stepping away from fantasy, I dabbled in mystery, science fiction, contemporary adventure, and even contemporary comedy. But none of these provided a creative canvas that I didn't find restrictive in some way. First, there's a lot more research involved when you're writing about the known world, and I'd rather spend that time elsewhere. Second, with the sole exception of an ill-fated attempt at writing a sequel to The Empire Strikes Back (at the age of seven), I've never felt the urge to write original stories in someone else's world. Why let myself be governed and constrained by their rules when I could invent my own? To me, that kind of work would be like riding a bicycle with training wheels: a fine way to learn, but at some point, if you truly want to explore what's out there, those training wheels have to come off.

As many writers have said before me, fantasy seems to be the most wide-open genre in terms of letting your imagination run amok. Within my own world, I can do anything I like, provided it remains consistent with whatever laws of nature and physics I've already set forth. I've found inspiration in terms of character and plot in stories from every genre imaginable, but I've always felt most comfortable in putting a fantastical spin on those ideas. After awhile, I decided not to fight it. Some will tell you to write what you know. Others, including myself, would advise you to write what you love. Writing is a long, lonely endeavor, fraught with obstacles and dejection in boundless supply. I used to tell people that if you're paying me, I'll write anything you want me to, but as long as I'm writing on spec, for myself alone, I'm going to write what entertains me. Epic fantasy does that, in a way that no other genre has, largely for the way in which it takes a little bit of everything—action, intrigue, romance, comedy, horror, mystery, religion, and more—and rolls them into one. I have an will continue to branch out, but I prefer to do so in screenplay form, where the commitment of time and self is less prolonged, and less intense. With novels, my plan is to continue to focus on the genre I most enjoy, and which gives me the most room to play.

Q. If I were to take a look at your bedside table, what books might I find there at the moment?

At the moment, you'd find Sidney Lumet's Making Movies, Vicki Pettersson's The Taste of Night (I just finished reading her debut, The Scent of Shadows, for the second tim and Ronald Krasneck's The Regents of Muran. I also have an anthology of short stories and Shawn Speakman's (soon-to-be-published) manuscript, Song of the Fell Hammer. Reference copies of Terry Brooks's The Elfstones of Shannara and Running with the Demon are sitting here as well.

All-time fantasy favorites are Brooks's Shannara, Martin's A Song of Ice & Fire, and Salvatore's Dark Elf books, among others. Outside the genre, I'm a sucker for Edgar Aller Poe, Shakespeare, and just about any Greek tragedy.

Q. Every author began writing for a reason. What factors and influences originally pushed you towards writing?

That's funny. I was thinking of asking you the same thing! But, since you asked first…

In simplest terms: boredom. My childhood was not a wealthy one. With five sons, my parents burned through their paychecks pretty quickly on food, clothing, healthcare—t basic necessities. Going to the movies and buying books was a rarity. So we mostly had to entertain ourselves. We did so by playacting stories like Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Conan, and others. Problem was, I liked to direct how the stories in our playacting sessions would unfold, and my brothers didn't always cooperate. Each had his own ideas, i you can imagine—some of which were great, to my young way of thinking, but not all.

I soon learned that as a prose writer, I could be author, director, and editor of my own tales. The characters (for the most part) behaved according to my will. Right or wro I could be the master of my own little universe, meting out judgments, penalties, and rewards as I saw fit. Most importantly, the stories didn't have to end. That was really what disappointed me most about the films I watched and the books I read: Invariably, they concluded, and I had to go back to my normal life without having them there to entertain me. My own, however, could go on and on for as long as they captured my interest. The moment one was finished, I was free to begin the next. I didn't have to wai for studio or publisher to get around to it; I could do it myself.

Over the years, there have been a number of other influences and factors that supported me in my dream, giving it renewed shape and purpose. But at its inception, it was just a boy who loved stories—who, when he couldn't get enough of them, decided to create his own. It wasn't that I had any burning need to share my imaginings with the world, only that they were enough to entertain me. A bit selfish, perhaps, but in some way, I think that every writer has to be. Because if we don't love what we do, then th isn't much chance that anyone else will, either.

Q. Any final words, my friend?

Yes. All this talk about myself reminds me of a favorite quote. "Some people are like Slinkies: not really good for anything, but they still bring a smile to your face when yo push them down a flight of stairs." That's me in a nutshell.

Seriously, thanks for the in-depth questions, and for indulging me in my longwinded responses. I hope I didn't put any of your readers out there to sleep—except of course f those suffering from insomnia. To them I would say, "You're welcome." For any who need it, there's a lot more insomnia-busting material in the Q&A section on my website.

Hope to see everyone in line when Shannara hits the big screen!

And there we go! Thanks goes out to Eldon for taking the time to serve up such a long interview, I really appreciate it. Check out Eldon's web site (HERE) and the Official T Brooks web site (HERE) to keep up to date on the progression of the Shannara movie!

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