

**Interview with Eldon Thompson, Fantasy Writer
By Heather Burke**

HB: Hi Eldon. How are you?

Could be worse. :)

HB: How long have you been writing for?

Yikes. About as long as I can remember. Some of my earliest memories are going to the movie theater to watch films like *Star Wars* and *Superman*. Films like that made me desperate to learn how to read, so that I could experience more of those fantastical adventures. As early as the second grade, I remember receiving creative writing assignments. A page or two was all that was required, but I would spend days writing and illustrating 30-page "epics." I guess you could say I've been writing my entire life.

HB: Do you think that if you hadn't gotten injured playing collage football you would have continued writing?

Almost certainly. My grand plan while growing up was to become an NFL quarterback, partly because the off season would allow me time enough to write books. I always wanted to do both. When it became clear to me that the NFL wasn't in the cards (long after it had become clear to those around me, mind you), I poured everything I had back into becoming a professional writer.

HB: Why did you want to become a fantasy writer?

Fantasy is without bounds, limited only by our imaginations. I remember that in the fifth grade, we weren't allowed to write about certain material. For instance, there could be no battles, no adventures involving bloodshed. And though I wrote other kinds of stories because of those restrictions, I still remember how frustrating it was to be told what I could or could not write about. Similarly, it seems to me that most genres reign you in with certain conventions that must be followed. With fantasy, nothing is off limits. The only rules are those that we as writers set forth. So long as we don't break those rules, readers will accept just about anything we dream up. If I want to write a murder mystery, a love story, a horror, a thriller... well, I can do so, and do it all within one big book labeled fantasy.

HB: Do you think you would have taken your writing in a different direction if there weren't amazing fantasy writers such as Terry Brooks?

Unquestionably, we are all the product of our forebears. If it weren't for *Shannara*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Middle-earth*, the works of Shakespeare, and dozens of similar influences, my writing would not be what it is today. Whether better or worse, I couldn't say, but certainly different. Without Brooks, in particular, I have no idea where I'd be, since he's not only my favorite author, but also an incredible instructor. I learned some

hard lessons while under his tutelage, and there's no guarantee I'd have learned those things had I been on my own.

HB: Your first published work is "The Crimson Sword" of the "The Legend of Asahiel" trilogy. Did you intend your first published work to be a trilogy?

I did. Bear in mind, the term "trilogy" is way overused these days. Anymore, it just means a set of three, no matter how well those individual parts may or may not fit together. My first series was planned as a trilogy in the original, Aristotelian sense. That is, each book represents one of the three acts of an overall story. The first book, "The Crimson Sword," is the first act of the trilogy, serving to introduce the world and its major characters. As such, it is a mostly standalone adventure. Book two, "The Obsidian Key," represents the second act of the trilogy, known as the complication. This is where we realize that book one was merely the tip of the iceberg. Like the second act of any story, it ends at the darkest moment, resulting in more of a cliffhanger ending. Book three, "The Divine Talisman," will wrap everything up, bringing us the final resolution denied us in book two. Some better known examples of Aristotelian trilogies include the original *Star Wars* trilogy (*Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*), the *Back to the Future* films, and *The Matrix* films.

One thing aspiring writers should note in this is that the first book does in fact stand alone. While I was fortunate to be offered a three-book deal, a lot of writers start off with one book at a time. A smaller upfront commitment generally means less risk for the publisher, which can actually help your chances of receiving that first offer. Of course, it's often said that a person has to have three books in print before anyone realize he/she has written even one. And in fact, many publishers don't begin to recoup costs on a new writer until that third book. So, take from that what you may. What I get out of it is that there are no hard and fast rules, just historical guidelines to take into account. Generally speaking, its easier to sell one book at a time than a great big set of three.

HB: When you're working on your books, do you ever find it hard to find your muse?

In the outlining stage, certainly. I'm one of those writers referred to as "architects," in that I like to sketch everything out in a sort of blueprint ahead of time. At this early stage, however, there are so many options available that it's hard to settle on which I think might work the best for a particular story. The good news is, once I have the outline in place, the day-to-day writing is much easier, in that I sit down knowing what has to happen in that scene. This generally allows me to make progress whether or not I'm "in the mood."

HB: If so what do you do to get back on track?

When I'm stuck? No real easy answer on this one. Sometimes it's a matter of putting on some appropriate music—for instance, I listen to a lot of orchestral film soundtracks (*Braveheart*, *Conan the Barbarian*, *Gladiator*, stuff like that). Sometimes I'll take my dog

for a walk or simply lay down for a spell in order to clear my head. Sometimes, when I'm really stuck, I have to just back away completely and go to the gym or go see a movie or just take a day off to figure out what's not working. In most cases, however, it's simply a matter of forcing myself to sit down and do the work, trusting that things will come out better than expected, or that—at the very least—I'll figure things out halfway through and have to do a little rework later on. Basically, getting started is the hardest part. Once I get going, it's equally hard to stop.

HB: Do you think that since the fantasy genre is booming since the Lord of the Rings movies were released, this is the perfect time for fantasy writers to make their presence known?

There certainly seems to be greater acceptance of fantasy adventure stories out there, particularly in Hollywood. Fantasy is no longer quite the "F-word" it used to be. Literary properties are being optioned all over the place, with everyone hoping to cash in on the next *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* or *Narnia*. At the same time, I've not seen yet that the average producer or manager or creative exec has any better grasp of how to deal with such material than before. Yes, they know now that it's marketable, but so many of them still have a hard time accepting them as viable stories without putting some sort of contemporary spin on them that they personally can understand.

Also, the success of *Rings* in particular has proven to be a double-edged sword. Folks out there who never read a fantasy book in their life—but who watched *Rings*—now have a general idea of what elves and dwarves and dragons and wizards and such are all about. However, when another script passes across their desk with elves in it, they say: "Didn't we already see that in *Lord of the Rings*?" Yes, just as we saw ten-gallon hats and spurs and six-shooters in every western film to come along prior to those made by Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood—yet we didn't stop those guys from making their films. Such elements are trappings of a genre, no more, but the average exec seems to think that elves and what-not are the sole invention and property of J. R. R. Tolkien. Because *Rings* was so astonishingly successful, studios are trying hard not to have their own fantasy films held up in comparison, for fear of falling flat. Thus, it seems at times that they are going out of their way to make films—even fantasy ones—as different from *Rings* as possible.

HB: Rumor has it there is a movie deal in the works. Would you care to shed some light on this rumor?

The movie deal I've been involved with is that of Terry Brooks's *Shannara*, recently announced by Warner Bros. I've been helping to push this project for quite some time, having written a screenplay adaptation of *The Elfstones of Shannara* that has been optioned by the studio. As of now, this is the book they want to kick off the franchise with.

I've also been approached more than once on *The Crimson Sword*, going so far as to sell an option for the series rights to an independent producer. With the *Shannara* deal finally closing, this is one of the projects I hope to turn my attention to.

HB: Are you concerned that the movie won't do your books justice?

Well, who knows? Maybe they can make them better!

Yes, this is always a concern. I've always assumed that if someone wanted to buy a house, for instance, that they did so because they liked that particular floor plan, yard, neighborhood—the entire package. Sure a little remodeling might be in order, but if some drastic overhaul were required, why buy it? Why not start somewhere else? Every now and then, however, a developer comes along who wants to buy up a property only to bulldoze it and start over from scratch. Unfortunately, Hollywood has a track record of doing just that: buying up known literary properties for the name only and turning them into something unrecognizable. I could complain all day as to what little sense this makes, but I'm not the one with the money, so it's not my decision to make. The best I can do is avoid selling to someone who clearly has no interest in my story, and who has no intent of even attempting to be faithful to the source material. As odd as some may see it, I'm much more protective of Terry Brooks's *Shannara* franchise than I am my own. Since I grew up loving these books of his, I have no intention of turning my back on them and letting Hollywood do whatever it wants without doing everything I can to defend their integrity. With my books... well, let's just say that I tend to be my own worst critic. If someone thinks they can do a better job, then, by all means, do as you will—after the check clears, of course.

HB: How involved are you going to be in the movie to keep the movie from losing the book's magic?

It's probably too soon to say, regardless of which property we're talking about. With *Shannara*, it depends largely on who comes aboard to helm the project in a director/producer role. If this person is a fan of the books, then I suspect he/she will adhere as closely as possible to my adaptation, since it's extremely faithful to the book on which it was based. If this person wants to put his/her own spin on Terry's story, then there will be next to nothing I can do. At this point, Warner Bros owns the material, to do with as they please. I'm hoping that they continue to welcome my input, and that they seek out Terry's, but as of yet, there's no way of knowing.

With *Crimson Sword*, it will—once again—depend on who's buying the thing, and whether or not they are fans of the story itself, or just its basic idea.

HB: Once "The Divine Talisman" is released next summer. What is next for you?

Oy, a long vacation? As of this moment, I am putting most of my time and energy into the film side of things, hoping to capitalize on the momentum gained through the *Shannara* deal. I'm trying to help one of my brothers get an independent film off the ground, as well as working on a few scripts of my own. In terms of my books, I'm still waiting to see what my publisher thinks of *Divine Talisman*. There are several different directions I could go with the story in terms of potential sequels. None are fully fleshed

out yet; again, I want to get feedback from my agent and editor—as well as readers—as to what they might want to see next. Regardless of the story vehicle, I suspect that we're all going to see a lot more of a certain warrior youth from *Crimson Sword*...

HB: Thank you Eldon for doing this interview. Is there anything you would like to add?

Thanks for the questions. It's been a pleasure!