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An Interview with Eldon Thompson



Eldon Thompson is a published fantasy writer and screenwriter. In college he had hopes of becoming an NFL quarterback. Fortunately that didn't happen and he stuck to writing. He is most known for his popular series The Legend of Asahiel. Eldon Thompson also helped write the screenplay for The Elfstones of Shannara (based on the novel by Terry Brooks).

How did you get into writing? At what age did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I took the red pill, when I should have taken the blue one. Thanks a lot, Morpheus.

I can't remember a time when I did not want to be a writer. Books and

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films were my favorite escape as a child. I never wanted them to end. But I didn't have an endless supply. My family was relatively low-income. Home videos were like \$100 a pop on our old \$500 Betamax player, so we didn't have many of those. And dragging five boys out to the theater happened maybe once a month. Same situation with books. The public and school libraries were my best friends, since my parents couldn't afford to purchase books at the rate I read through them. And even if money hadn't been an issue, there were other limitations to enjoying someone else's story. If it was a current, ongoing series, there was that interminable wait for the next sequel. If it was a completed saga, well, they all came to an end. At some point, I realized that the only stories I didn't have to wait on, could go on forever, and didn't cost me a cent, were those I wrote myself.

What was your first book or story that you completed? Did you ever get it published?

The first? God only knows. I was telling stories before I knew how to write, and writing stories as soon as I had a rudimentary grasp of the alphabet. Most of those primitive efforts have long since fallen into the ash heap of life where they belong. A few do stand out. I remember a hybrid sci-fi/horror/fantasy saga named "Halloween" (and sequels) featuring villains such as the Ghost Goblin. And just the other day, I ran across old handwritten copies of "Revenge of the Lava Lizards" (and sequels), which was again a sci-fi/fantasy gem that borrowed liberally from just about everything I'd ever read... complete with illustrations that would have gotten me kicked off your Pictionary team. No, they were never submitted for publication. In fact, I tried to throw the "Lava Lizards" binders away when I uncovered them, but my brother yanked them from the to-be-tossed pile and told me I had to keep them. Too much fun to look back on, I suppose, for those who enjoy mocking me.

How did you finally get published? When were you able to write on a full time basis? Please explain your success story?

Who knows how these things happen? I suppose it boiled down to years of writing and revising, a madman's persistence, and the kind of luck that would have won me a multimillion-dollar jackpot if I'd been playing the lottery instead. I've thrown away far more work than I've published—that's for certain. All in the name of practice. I also studied language and writing through high school, college, graduate programs, and writers' conferences.

The latter allowed me to meet published authors whose guidance and recommendations proved invaluable when it came to interacting with the publishing community (i.e. agents and editors). Finding my agent was a matter of research (learning how to write a proper query letter) and timing (he happened to be moving to a new agency that wanted to grow its fantasy roster). And I'm living proof that a great agent can make all the difference when it comes to approaching the big hitters in New York. The advance I received was enough to allow me to quit living in my car (that's another story) and write the sequels to my fantasy trilogy full-time. Although my agent is too nice and well-respected a guy to have made any sort of deal with the devil, I still wonder sometimes what must have gone on behind the scenes to allow me this opportunity.

How do you stay motivated to finish a novel? How do you stay focused?

Motivation isn't really an issue when you're doing something that you love. I write because I enjoy the process. Most days, I can't think of many things I'd rather be doing. If I go too long without writing, I get cranky and irritable, the same way I get when I go too long without food or sleep. Most writers I know tend to feel the same. So if you're a writer with issues of motivation, I'd be willing to bet that you're: (a) writing for some reason that has more to do with having written (fame, fortune, ego) than a desire to actually write, or (b) you've lost track of your story somewhere, and need to reevaluate its course. (Yes, I'm referring here to the dreaded writer's block, which I'll address in a minute.)

Focus can be a bit trickier. Life is filled with distractions. So it becomes a matter of prioritizing. When I'm up against a deadline, I put aside any obligation that can wait. Bills, chores, recreational activities... it all just sits on hold until my work is finished. This often includes friends and family—the neglect of which is a topic all its own, but which partly explains why other people find writers to be "weird." Most times, however, it's not that drastic. The trick is to set a schedule for yourself, and to stick to it. Let others know that when you're in your office at such-and-such time, with the door closed and headphones on, you're in your writing world and would prefer not to be disturbed. If you write regularly enough, it becomes a habit like any other. Rather than having to force yourself to work, it'll instead feel odd when you don't.

What is your writing schedule like? Do you write in the mornings, evenings, and for how long?

I tend to work best in the mornings, before the daily minutiae of the real world has a chance to clutter my little mind. Before looking at email, news headlines, sports scores, or anything else, I'll read and review whatever work I wrote the previous day, in order to start the wheels turning. That provides a natural segue into whatever new writing I'm doing that day. The little hamster in my head is generally good for two or three hours before getting burned out, at which point I'll head to the gym to recharge. Afterward, with the blood moving again, I'll write for another three or four hours, or whatever I'm good for. I shoot for 1500-2000 words a day, six days a week. It's a regimented structure, less romantic than the notion of writing when the muse strikes. But if I did it any other way, I'd never accomplish anything.

How do you get your ideas? What is your method for remembering them?

I steal them. From everyone and everywhere. No, I don't mean plagiarism. But I am constantly absorbing books, films, music, artwork, news articles, family gossip... in a word, life. Inspiration is all around us. The trick is to take a little of this and that and cobble it all together in brand new form—your own Frankenstein's monster, if you will. I have no desire to tread the exact same ground in the exact same way that some other writer has. At the same time, I believe firmly in the adage that "there's nothing new under the sun." If you were to dream up something entirely original, then, by definition, how would any reader relate? So I'm constantly on the lookout for some drawing, some lyric, or some life experience that sparks in my mind as a usable piece in a future puzzle. As for remembering these little morsels? Some, like interesting names, I'll write down in a notebook, to be drudged up when called for. The larger items, like plot threads, I entrust to memory. I've learned over time that the best ideas are those that I make no effort to memorize, but which stay with me anyway, gnawing at me until I find a way to utilize them.

If you get writer's block, how do you get over it?

They say that clear writing is a product of clear thinking. Writer's block, then, is generally a case of not having given sufficient thought to where

your story is going. I rarely encounter this, because I prefer the "architectural" approach to writing. That means I don't attempt to construct anything—be it a scene, a character, or a plot point—without having sketched it out in blueprint (outline) first. This method can be aggravating and time consuming on the front end of a project, but I find that it saves me a ton of aggravation and time on the back end. It's the "gardening" approach to writing that generally allows for writer's block, because you've planted all these seeds, have watered and nurtured them... but still have to wait now and then for a sprout to emerge or a bud to open. This method allows writers to dive right into a story, but often costs much more time and effort in the long run in terms of pruning, splicing, weeding, and so forth to make sure that everything fits together as it should. My advice to those with writer's block, then, is usually to stop what you're doing (as if you have much choice) and think things through. Look back to see if you've made a wrong turn somewhere. It'd essentially be like stopping to ask for directions, rather than simply driving onward or coming to a stop there on the side of the road.

What piece of advice would you give to someone thinking of becoming a writer? What is a good starting point for them?

I'd probably have them try the nearest psychiatrist. If they couldn't afford the therapy, they could at least buy a strait jacket with which to keep themselves away from the keyboard.









But for those who won't be denied, start by forgetting the notion that, in order to wear the esteemed title of "writer," one must be published. We're defined by our actions. If a person writes, then he or she is a writer. While external validation is always nice, it's not the end-all, be-all. Another piece of encouragement: writing is not mathematics. If there was a perfect formula for storytelling, then it would have been patented long ago, leaving no room for new craftsmen. While there are all sorts of tips and structures and guidelines for maximizing a story's emotional impact, nothing of what has come before necessarily means your story has to follow suit. That said, any writer seeking to make a professional living would do well to study these guidelines incessantly. Know them so well that adhering to them (or deviating from them, when need be) becomes instinctive. Put plainly: read, write, and repeat. The more you study, and the more you practice, the better your work will be. Learn to accept and analyze feedback from any and all quarters. Be happy when you get an opportunity to throw away

what doesn't work, and start again. Oh, and aim for the heart. No matter the genre or its trappings, a story is meant to elicit an emotional reaction from its readers. I don't care how alien your landscapes are, or how quirky your characters, or how mind-bending your plot twists. It'll all fall flat if it doesn't grip me beneath the skin. Care enough about what you're saying to make your readers care about it, and your work will find its audience.

What little else I know about writing, including practical advice on a slew of specific topics, can be found on aisle nine... er, I mean, in the [Q&A section of my website](#).

To find out more about Eldon Thompson and his published work, go to the [Eldon Thompson official website](#).

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