



Eldon Thompson Interview



Eldon, I'd like to open this with an explanation for the readers of how we came into contact. I had the pleasure of meeting you in a hallway at San Diego's Comic-Con before your first book came out. I believe we had mutual friends in Les Dabel (President of DB Pro). For me, someone who at the time had probably completed about a quarter of his own novel, it was fascinating to meet someone just a few steps ahead. I had met plenty of people from most levels of writing success from a NY Times Bestselling author to those who "had great story ideas", or "started a novel when they were younger", but I'd never met someone who'd actually finished a novel and was just starting the process of their first book publishing – getting beyond the agent and then getting signed. What's your best memories from those early days of your career?

Eldon: The word to describe it would have to be surreal. I remember the call from my agent, telling me that we had an offer. The advance was enough that I would be able to leave my job to concentrate on writing full time. The contract was for three books, though I had only completed one. This was something I had dreamed of and been working toward almost my entire life, since I was about four years old. The sense of validation... well, it's something that every aspiring author should feel. Being a pessimistic person by nature (more so then than now), I kept waiting for the offer to fall through somehow, for the rug to be pulled out from underneath me. It was difficult to fathom that I had truly crossed the threshold of becoming a "professional" writer.

That said, I remember spending most of those early days explaining to friends and family that it wasn't like I had won the lottery and was ready to retire. The analogy I used was that of a marathon. I had entered the race and been given that number to wear on my chest, but I still had to run the darn thing. More than ever before, it was time to go to work. I now had deadlines to meet. Starting in on that second book... that was the most pressure I had ever felt. You work hard to make the first book as good as it can be, but you really don't know if anyone will ever read it. However, I knew going in that this next one would be... by my

editor if no one else. Would it meet her expectations? Would readers enjoy it? Would critics? There are tons of doubts that go along with this sort of enterprise, and having a book contract really does nothing to mitigate them. I just kept reminding myself how grateful I was for the opportunity. I'd been told that most authors have to have three books in print before anyone realizes you've written one. I'd been given a chance to get all three of those first books out there. It was everything I could have asked for.

Aside from the initial excitement and accompanying pressure, I remember the thrill of joining a community of authors who had long served as my idols. Though I didn't know it yet, I would spend the next couple of years rubbing elbows with the likes of Robert Jordan, George R. R. Martin, James Clemens, Jim Butcher, and many more. To have them look at me as a fellow professional rather than just another diehard fan was, again, simply surreal. I didn't see myself any differently—any more or less skilled at telling a story than I had been prior to my book deal. But all of a sudden, I was “part of the club”. That annoyed me, to a degree, since I don't believe a person's value is determined by their professional achievements. At the same time, I felt blessed to be in that position, and was immediately determined to do what I could to help other aspiring writers experience the same.

One thing that most impressed me about you was your willingness to connect with me, who at the time was little more than a brief contact with the common interest of Terry Brooks's Shannara work. When I received your email, it blew me away, and ties into a personality trait I've found in you – humility. Now, if you talk about your own humility, it'd be ... well, not humble. But I think I can get you to discuss it in how it affected your stories. With the grandiosity of Torin's quest in Crimson Sword, did your own personal views play into its unintended outcomes in the subsequent volumes of the trilogy? (and if so, how do you present your personal beliefs in a novel without sounding preachy).

Eldon: Hey, I'm a fan of anyone who's a fan of Terry Brooks. And, as I indicated above, being able to realize a lifelong dream is an incredible feeling that every dedicated person should experience. Whatever you call it (giving back, paying it forward), I feel an obligation to assist others in any way that I can. I try not to go around offering unsolicited advice, but if someone asks my opinion about something, I'm always willing to offer my two cents' worth.

As to how my personal views play into my stories... well, that can be a scary question to answer. First, I don't want to impose my personal views onto readers. I want them to take from the story what they will. Second, it's not just the more endearing traits like humility that stem from me. As the creator of these characters, I'm called upon to explore personal motivations such as pride, rage, bitterness, selfishness, betrayal... every emotion that is present. And that, to answer the last part of your question, is the best way to avoid sounding “preachy”. Don't espouse a singular point of view. Let the reader view your world through your characters' eyes, and let those viewpoints differ from one another. Even your villains should believe they are in the right. In launching World War II, Adolf Hitler thought he was doing the German people a great service. Most of us would consider his deeds monstrous, but that doesn't mean he didn't have his own reasons and justifications for committing them. Just show us what your characters think, and let the reader decide which of them are most relatable. I once had a reader tell me that she wanted to hear more of my voice come through in my narrative, that it was muddled by the different character voices. But since I am not telling these stories from the point of an omniscient narrator, I want my author voice to be invisible. It's all about giving the characters their say, and letting the reader sort through the chaos in search of the “truth”.

I admit that Torin exhibits a great deal of humility... an excessive amount, for some readers, who are so often accustomed to their fantasy heroes being full of swagger and bravado as they wade through seas of enemies with invincible swords, bulging biceps, and/or bursts of magic possessed by no one else. But that was exactly my point. In the real world, heroes aren't necessarily those who are the fastest, the strongest, or the most invincible. They aren't gifted with some rare power that makes them the one and only person capable of saving the world. In this story, I wanted to explore the idea of an ordinary person being confronted with the extraordinary circumstances so often found in epic fantasy. The entire world is still at risk. There are demons and dragons to be confronted and slain. But what if the person called upon to do so wasn't gifted beyond measure? What if it was you or me or someone else with no special skills to speak of?

Would he rise to the challenge or crumble under the pressure? Even if he made every sacrifice and did what he believed was right, would that necessarily result in happiness for all? Noble intentions don't always lead to positive results. Even great deeds can have unimaginable consequences. Torin is humble because he has every reason to be. He realizes that he is fallible, and is therefore cautious about imposing his will. As to whether his worldviews most closely represent my own... I'll leave that to those who know me to decide.

You said on your site: “In my mind, passion and determination are perhaps the most important ingredients when it comes to writing—more so, perhaps, than any god-given ability. Those of us with less natural talent may have to work a little harder at it than others, but it’s the effort we apply that will make the biggest difference in the long run.” What has been the greatest challenge in your writing life that has required that passion and determination?

Eldon: Ha! You name it. R. A. Salvatore once told me that no matter how many copies you sell, awards you win, or readers you inspire, there will always be those who are eager to tell you that you have no business setting pen to paper. Such criticisms raise doubts that most of us foster already on our own. I'm not one to pull my hair out over every negative review... particularly given the subjective nature of art in any form. But the biggest challenge I face on a daily basis is the question of whether I can actually do this. Can I say something that will resonate with at least some readers out there? I'm not someone who likes to hear himself talk. I already know what I think, and would therefore prefer to listen to what others think. I believe I know how to elicit certain emotions throughout the course of a story. I've been told that I can do so in an entertaining fashion. I enjoy telling stories, and as long as I believe people are enjoying them, I will continue to do so. But writing is a business of rejection and criticism. All writers have been told at some point to give up and do something else. Parents, teachers, friends, siblings, agents, editors, critics... they're out there, telling you that you are wasting your time. If you aren't passionate about writing... if you're not determined to succeed despite the naysayers, then they're right: you may as well give up now. Fortunately for me, I thrive on negative feedback. It pushes me to work harder. The more I'm told I can't do something, the more determined I become to test myself. If I strike you as being humble, that might be why, because I refuse to believe anything nice someone says about me or my work. I live in constant fear of complacency, the road to which is paved with pride and satisfaction. As long as I'm being told by myself or others that I can't do this, my determination should keep me going, fighting to prove otherwise.

You’ve mentioned in the past that you have worked out the world from “the Legend of Asahiel” trilogy (LoA) more than what was seen by the reader. I don’t want you to reveal one of those secrets, but I am interested in what you view as the most obscure, yet important secret, that you feel was an “inside special” that many wouldn’t “get”.

Eldon: In Chapter 20 of *The Crimson Sword*, Spithaera refers to herself as “a daughter of the Cythraul.” I believe this is the only mention of that name (Cythraul) in the first three books. Yet it refers to the first great conflict of the Asahiel universe, a conflict which led to the creation of this world and all others. In a later series, I mean to show the ongoing ramifications of that initial schism between the Cythraul and the Ceilhigh (divided factions of the Eleahim), and how the very fabric of the cosmos is threatened when the balance between them is upset. (Ravar uses the term “Eleahim” in *The Divine Talisman*, another solitary reference.)

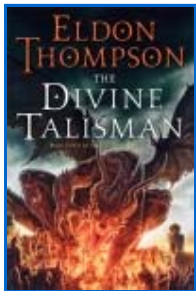
There are also a few references to the Mage Wars, a conflict that took place in the time between the Dragon Wars and the War of the Demon Queen seen in these books. In *The Crimson Sword*, we learn that Spithaera was initially drawn into this world against her will by sorcerers who intended to use her as a weapon against their enemies, in the distant land of Sekulon. And in *The Obsidian Key*, we visit the isle of Shattercove, where the wizard Soric tapped into a cache of magic whose owners have long since vanished. In future volumes, I plan to reveal more about this war between multiple mage factions, each of which specialized in a different form of magic.

One of the challenges I’m finding as I near completion of my novel is the title. The Message is what you know it as, same as everyone else, because it’s been that same title since I was 17 and began the early experiments into writing what eventually became the themes of my wip (Work in Progress). I’m not 17 anymore, but the title has stuck. What process did you use in your own search for a title? Was

the publisher intimately involved in the process? What are some of your own favorite titles from other authors?

Eldon: My working title for the first book was Dyers Eve, a Metallica song from their album, ...And Justice for All. I never expected the title to stick, but, like you, I never got around to changing it. When I developed the story as a screenplay at UCLA, my classmates and instructor urged me to simplify the title to The Crimson Sword, focusing on the talisman at the heart of the story. I wasn't too keen on that until I realized that I could also use the talisman to name the subsequent volumes. (The Obsidian Key and The Divine Talisman are alternate names referring to the same artifact.) That, to me, gave the overall series a rhythmic feel. Also, I was taught that a fantasy series should have two names: one for the overall series, and one for the individual books. One or the other needs to be fanciful (strange) enough to suggest the fantasy genre, while the other needs to be simple, so that readers can remember it. With my overall series being called The Legend of Asahiel, I became more comfortable with the comparatively bland book titles. I was half expecting the publisher to suggest alternate titles, but they never did.

My favorite titles are unquestionably those used by George R. R. Martin in his inimitable series, A Song of Ice and Fire. Volume titles such as A Game of Thrones, A Clash of Kings, A Storm of Swords, A Feast for Crows (my personal favorite), and A Dance with Dragons contain both a lyrical balance and suggestive imagery that is extremely difficult to capture. Like the stories themselves, I wish that I had thought of them.

You know of my love of ancient history and cultures, but in reading the LoA trilogy, I found several cultural connections, most notably with your elves. What process did you use in designing the elf culture and what real world cultures were most influential? What fantastic twists did you put on those cultures?

Eldon: The Finlorian elves are essentially an extinct civilization that last thrived 3000 years ago, having built immense cities that now lie in ruin. So, for them, I looked closely at the ancient Egyptians. With the Mookla'ayan elves, I wanted a more primitive, aboriginal people such as might be found in Australia or a South American jungle. The most notable "twist," if you will, would have to be that the Mookla'ayans are cannibals—not simply because they ran out of chickens or because cannibalism is frightening, but because of their religious beliefs. In their minds, when an individual dies, he undertakes a quest in death to undo the evil he had committed in life. Only after rectifying all of his misdeeds does the deceased find peace. The strength granted him in his posthumous journey is that maintained by the living who consume his flesh. Thus, they eat one another to speed departed friends on their way to heavenly bliss. As with any religion, there are deviations held by the various sects, but that's the gist. It's also an example of how, in the creation of our fictional worlds, everything should be as it is for a reason. If you're going to create a character with yellow eyes, a world with five moons, or an entire race with blue skin and homicidal tendencies, you the author should know why. Readers want to know that for every bit of madness, you have a method to it. That's one of the primary differences between fiction and real life. Real life doesn't always make sense. Fiction, on the other hand, should.

To learn more about Eldon, visit his website ([link provided in my links section](#)).

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