

I'm a nut for nostalgia, so when it comes to revisiting the past you might consider me first on board: some nights I can sit with the camcorder projecting images of my childhood and I can only watch with a hint of retrospective awe. When it was mentioned that I should go back to *The Inlands Trilogy* I had the same euphoric feeling that comes with good memories. It's been three years since the trilogy was initially completed in its first draft, so I figured it would be thrilling to revisit a story, a world I hadn't really immersed myself in for some time spare the daydreams of watching a film studio tackle the specific minutiae of my narrative and looking to me for approval. To me *The Inlands Trilogy* has always represented my evolution as a writer. Each book becomes, in effect, a sort of step in my development, so when I pick up a copy of *The Man with the Stone*, it's almost as if I'm putting a Super 8 tape in the camcorder to reconnect with a version of myself from 2002.

This book is the strangest of the three to me: of course the third in the series takes the narrative down uncertain paths some readers will find extremely difficult to understand (I'll get to that when I cover *The Traveling Man*), but the first book seems like a bastardized stepchild. I started writing it without intending its idea to split the seams of brevity forcing an inevitable series. I started writing it with a specific audience in mind: the young reader. You may have noticed how elementary it reads at first, and how the first line of the book, "Edwin Krollup was the richest man in town, perhaps in the country," conjures up the simplicity of straightforwardness and the grandiosity or hyperbole of children's fiction. That's exactly what I was going for: this was supposed to be read in the same manner of gothic imagism you find in children's movies where the adult perspective is always dark, and brightness only comes from the young. There was a sense of wonder in the idea; it was why Edwin's manse turned into a castle with what one could only assume needed flying buttresses to prop its towering spires. It was a magical realist approach to the real world: I didn't even base it in a real city. Rather, it became an American amalgam. The reader could place its locale wherever he or she wanted as a means to familiarize themselves with the tale. Edwin could have been their neighbor for all I cared.

So I started with that idea...a world where one man could monopolize aggregate industry, isolating himself in a castle upon a hill overlooking the city below. It had a certain Burtonesque charm to it. My only problem was: I didn't know what to do with

the story. I knew I wanted this fellow, Edwin, to be in possession of something that gave him the power to move statues. I could always imagine an army of statues, moving to appease the whim of some laughing maniac with nothing but destruction on his mind. And I knew I wanted him to high-jack the statue of David from Florence...I even had an idea to fold the heist into the story in an elaborate scheme, but the more I thought about it the more I wanted this world I was creating to settle further inside the berms of reality, rather than on its farthest fringes. So there needed to be an aspect of real business practicality: I needed to create a conflict, one which would later prove the heist had actually not been accomplished as planned. I mean, who would ever believe someone would allow the sale of the statue of David for fifty million dollars? Even children would have scratched their heads at the idiocy of the notion. The Italian Ministry of Art, which at first was just a plot device to create an initial obstacle for Edwin became a point of the story to return later in what I consider one of the tensest scenes in the book: when Edwin is being interrogated by a Ministry honcho and her two henchmen, just as the wolves are coming up the mines. You may be scratching your head thinking: he's going for more realism and he's talking about moving statues and wolves invading mines? Yes, and that brings me to the actual reason why I even started writing this book. Because I imagined a hidden door in a closet, just above the dim light bulbs that opened to an incredible secret. And this is where the entire series is born—from the idea of twin brothers who want to find escape from an evil cigar-smoking stepfather.

In 2001 I went to a little movie called *Fellowship of the Ring*. It opened up a door to a new way of thinking for me: I had never really approached fantasy before, afraid, I suppose, of the stereotypes attached to the Dungeon and Dragon crowd. But Tolkien showed me how unbelievable the imagination could be if you only just let it breathe. Here he had a world all his own, a world where principles of logic and language, race and history were of his own making. I left the theater thinking about that possibility. I was in University at this point, in my first year of an English undergrad, and I had been bogged in the elitist literature of the liberal humanities, learning to attach modern theoretical sensibilities to books that really didn't call for them. I needed an escape. I was constantly thinking about Middle Earth, constantly recalling the images I'd seen, the images Peter Jackson flawlessly conjured from fifty year old text. My academic self

forced me to look at the text as a form of anti-industrialist symbolism, but the part of me...the *aspiring* part of me who wished to one day sit before a computer like Stephen King looked at the text as a door opening opportunity. Tolkien created a world of Hobbits and wizards: why couldn't I do the same? So I attempted to rack my brains for a plausible story, something that could connect a sense of escapism the same way the *Lord of the Rings* did for me. I wanted my idea to seem original, to remove itself from any comparisons to the father of such fantasy: I wanted my story to influence its own offshoots. I wanted readers to leave my world with the same sense of awe and bewilderment as I had when I trudged out of the theater considering purchasing another ticket for the next showing. The Inlands was born from the mind of a student looking for a nice vacation from academia. Although the idea wasn't original, I came up with a scenario in my head pursuing the question of what would it be like if a place like Middle Earth was connected to our world?

The word that came to my head was: *dangerous*. It was the best word to start with. Why was it dangerous? It forced me to culminate a series of histories, which I began jotting on loose pieces of paper as I quickly drew versions of what the Inlands might look like on four sheets of paper I had taped together to increase the surface upon which I could write. The Inlands was dangerous, I figured, because it was torn apart by conflict. Of course: it was as simple as war, as unrest. Every great story had an overarching conflict that desperately needed resolution. But how could a war in one world directly influence the narrative of another? Again I went to the drawing board. I never wrote an outline. I devised a series of historical trends, tracing certain lineages and investigating the past of somebody called David the Hunter, a character who never really has a tangible presence in the books but whose legacy inspires much of the trilogy's events. There were wizards...there were once giants. There was a race of mutated wolves called Yilaks. It was beginning to formulate into a genuine idea. But I never wrote an outline. I hate outlines. I hate boundaries. When anyone ever asks how I write or plan a story, I simply tell them I'm like a wheel rolling through mud. The ideas sort of collect during my revolutions, and what I don't like I discard—it's the stuff that usually hits your windshield should you be driving behind me. So with the history of this other world fermenting, I went back to the narrative of Edwin and his stepsons.

Jimmy and Cole are distinct opposites, creating thus another conflict which I was hoping my young readers would familiarize with. In this sense Cole became my favorite character to play with; he was just haunted by so many demons, which all seemingly stemmed from the same instant. When his father died of cancer. I had this great character I knew I could have fun with, and I knew I wanted to spend a lot of time with him. He had to go to the Inlands. He was the reader: he was curious and inclined to escape. There was one scene I thought about for a long time, and I really do think it was this one scene that drove me to continue writing this tale, even as it grew past the barriers of young fiction and delved into more mature, adult themes. I knew Cole was going to be important. I didn't know why, but I could always picture him in the heart of some sepulchral geologic chamber, staring wondrously at ghosts as they tried to eat chocolate. I could see this scene as if it were actually a part of a movie I'd just watched. It was unreal, and truly proved just how powerful this storytelling was becoming. So before Cole ventures into the mines, which base the doorway into the Inlands, I had to include an almost Easter egg-like foreshadowing for the reader: when Cole grabs his chocolates (Glossettes Peanuts, wouldn't you know: I think I had a sense of ET-like candy merchandising going through my head as I wrote) I indicate it will be the most important thing he's ever done in his life. That right there was the greatest sense of accomplishment for me: it proved I had the formations of a real story coming together, and it somehow connected the present text to a future part of me that would one day conclude this tale. At that point I would have never guessed the story would take three books. I wouldn't have found that out until half way through the second book as I pulled my hair out rummaging the narrative for any indications of obvious resolution.

As I sit here writing this, I'm thinking not about the finished product, the actual bound book with the beautiful artwork on its cover, I'm thinking about the iterations this story went through before I even had a sense of inner-relief that I could take a breather. I suppose that's the most enjoyable part of revisiting the past: because I can remember those instances of teeth-grinding annoyance at writer's block with a sense of tongue-in-cheek irreverence, because it was those instances of textual retardation that really motivated me to trudge on. I hated writing about Haspin...he needed to be there, I thought, but I just didn't know why. I kept re-writing his dialogue to Lor about their history to illuminate the reader to his cause, but it never felt right. This was before I

figured I needed a central villain, someone behind the scenes that plays an almost irreligious role—but the Traveling Man’s character never truly fleshed out until the second book, so I had to revisit *Wizard’s Blood* to add some more tidbits as a form of portentous foreshadowing for what had yet to come. And yes, when I first wrote *The Man with the Stone*, I called it *Wizard’s Blood*, fully understanding the morbidity of the title but lost for any other ideas. It wasn’t until I had finally completed the trilogy that I went back to the first book and torched the original title, thinking just how awful that would look on the bookshelf, and thinking just how tawdry and unbelievably schlocky the words would read, forcing potential readers to wonder if it was the novelization of some George Romero movie still in production. I had to axe the title: it wasn’t a Rothian, Mel Gibson-like tale of gornography. This was a book about a boy getting taken to another world and his brother’s attempt to overcome guilt and retrieve him. Beneath the layers of subplot and history, this was a simple story about a dysfunctional family who wanted to revisit better times...and who wanted to fully redeem them. This story led to Jimmy’s redemption and laid the seeds for Edwin’s as well. The trilogy is really about Edwin’s path to redemption, removing the shackles of that stone he wore around his throat to introduce the man as he actually is: the means to re-articulate both Jimmy and Cole’s idea of a father and family.

I love revisiting this story. I love the very idea that somewhere, some place there’s a chance a megalomaniac is hiding an enormous secret under the pretence that he is protecting the world. I’m often told by my younger readers that this was their favorite book, and I find it completely understandable, because in its totality it reads the most like an individuated piece. The second book relies on the third to conclude it. *The Man with the Stone* was imbued with some of the most fantastic scenes, some of which are my favorite in the series: I love the chapter in which Jimmy confronts the spiders in the Leeg Woods. I love the idea of a flawed wizard, somebody from which the answers to the narrative are expected, but whose answers might seem potentially fabricated to protect his own guilt for abandoning the world in its darkest time. I love the Freudian implications behind Edwin’s ongoing guilt throughout the story, and the Shakespearean paranoia which plagues him whenever Jimmy and Cole are near. Because great power comes attached with the fear of loss. I love the detective story that culminates from the disappearance of Cole, and then later Jimmy, and I love realizing how multi-layered this

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story truly is. Should I ever pick up the book to read a few pages, I do understandably cringe at some of the typographical and syntactic mistakes, but I look at them as a growing experience, the stepping stones of my evolution as a writer. It isn't perfect. None of them are. Sometimes I question why I took the story a certain way, then realize it wasn't really in my power to change: the story took the direction it was supposed to take. When it gets to a certain point, the narrative is really out of the author's hand. The story takes over. And it was this idea that began to guide the inception of the plot resolution for the third book.