

When *The Matrix Reloaded* was released in 2003 I shared the same unfettered anticipation of anyone with two working eyes and a penchant for wire-fu: this was the film that would expand on the microcosm of the original flick that had grown so many “intellectual” debates in the cyber world. I stood in line at the theater and wondered what the story had in store: would it be more of the same, or did the writers have the gall to explore new directions? I was more than pleasantly surprised while I watched the movie. *Reloaded* took everything we knew about the original and turned it on its head...and I loved it. I was fascinated by the world that had culminated from the choices the writers made. I knew many fans were disappointed, and most of their complaints stemmed from the very fact that they hardly understood what they’d just seen. But I was enthralled...it was a very similar feeling that followed me after watching *Lord of the Rings*. In fact, it would support the very foundations of my next book in *The Inlands* series.

I had a lot of ground to cover and it was this thought that scared me the most as I sat and stared at the blinking icon over a blank page. Because that ‘ground’ had to come from nothing. There is hardly anything in the world that frightens a writer more than the color white...well, maybe spiders. Or snakes. Or spiders on the back of a snake. But the color white represents struggle...it represents the challenge of persistent imaginative urging until one little thread takes hold and you can go with it. But that one thread may take hours to unfold...or days. Or it might not even come. It might just become a tumorous growth against which you frustratingly toss the ball when you have *Writer’s Block*. The color white, to me, just meant that I had to start all over, and the very fact that I had a finished book on my hard drive meant nothing to me other than the sweet anguish that this new story had to be written in order to conclude the first. Because the first had left off with a new thread: more characters had found the mine, and Jimmy, Cole and Edwin were stuck in the *Inlands*. This book was about getting them out. But how? And that damn blinking icon mocked me for a long time while I went over the specifics of *The Man with the Stone*. The only thing I truly resolved in that book was the ages old conflict with *Grak Ulak* (a phonetic pun on the name *Dracula*). The main villain was killed...so what do I do? I decided this book would be a quest story. I loved the idea. I wanted to explore the *Inlands* the same way the Wachowskis got to explore the deepest furrows of the *Matrix* in their sequel. I thought it would be

fun: not just for the reader, but for myself, because up to that point I'd only really seen the smallest quadrant of the world I'd made up...of the map I'd drawn and taped to the wall over my monitor. Now I could see what else the Inlands had to offer, and the curiosity of the idea got the best of me.

Starting a book is the hardest. You have to find a formula, and I don't mean a clichéd formula that will drive the entire plot the way many authors have mastered with their color-by-the-numbers novels. I looked to *The Matrix Reloaded* for some much needed inspiration and realized this new book had to start with a dream, a dream or vision that would reoccur later in the narrative as a means to truly unspool the story and maybe even throw in a few twists. That dream became Isabella's visit with her father in a state of limbo called the Void. This is where Isabella learns she is the creation of prophecy, that she is the Huntress, a sort of estrogenic Neo if you will. The relationship with my filmic inspiration did not end there: I modeled the first part of the book on the basic interlaying contrast of the Matrix and the Real World. I would spend one chapter in the Inlands, following my characters' struggle south, and then proceed with a chapter in this world, following a cop named Lela Saxon, who stumbles on the cryptic truth that something just might be out there beyond the veil of the real. In her desperate attempt to uncover that truth, her trail is impeded by a covert agency I modeled after the Todorovian mould: these men and women would be modern day knights whose sole purpose was to distort the reality of the surreal and blend its existence into the realm of myth until those fantastic stories you hear in passing become just that: stories. Dean Wach, the man who represents this agency, is introduced in a similar fashion as the agents in the Matrix, his purpose mostly clouded in the shroud of figurative language as he explains the reasoning of the agency's existence. He wears a dark suit, and speaks without intonation other than the condescending pitch which constitutes his dislike for the subjects who stumble on some wormhole burrowed through the fabric of reality into fantasy. In a sense, like an agent from the Matrix, he is almost robotic, socially retarded. I even abbreviated Wachowski to name the character. Wach: it was my own sort of twisted homage to the writers and creators of perhaps one of my favorite movies. I thought the entire idea seemed neat...seemed like something I could truly explore. It gave a certain 'logical' reasoning to the doorway through the mines that opened up to this whole

other world. I wouldn't go so far as calling it a computer program meant to stifle humanity as a means of absolute control, but I thought the 'what if' scenario opened up a whole new realm of possibilities. What if our world was connected to another? Yes, that tagline drew the very foundations of the first book: this book would need another form of branding.

What if there were many worlds connected to our own? Yes, I was getting closer. Closer to what would truly define the trilogy, I suppose, but at the point of writing this book I was more inclined to wonder what if the stories you read about Dracula and Frankenstein weren't just fictitious characters meant to act as symbolic alternatives to counter cultural norms, but were actually real creatures that had existed but because of some clandestine agency were just folded into fairy tale as a means to stifle the truth. And there it was...it was all about silencing the truth, looking at the world through black and white lenses. There was no gray area, no neutrality. In fact, there was a pill that would coerce you to forget you'd even made contact with a werewolf. Osril became that pill in the story, the same way Neuralizers became the avenue by which MIB erased your memory in Sonnenfeld's classic Men in Black. Osril: it was a name whose root found its meaning in Oz, the very magical world of the 'Other', where witches dash across the margins of the sky on broomsticks followed by eerily anthropomorphic monkeys with fluttering wings. The narrative which occurs in this world then follows Lela Saxon as she tries desperately to overcome this wonderdrug, this pill that had never seen the light of day by FDA analysts; it followed the same formula as Neo as he tried desperately to uncover the truth of the Matrix, knowing deep down there was something false about the world around him. For Lela, she knew there was something false about her memory; she knew she'd seen something at Krollup's estate, but beyond the brief glimpses of recollection in dreams, she had nothing to fall back on but assumption. There was something frightening about the idea: that any one of us could have stumbled on a mystery, but have merely forgotten it because the secret was never supposed to be made public.

The story in the Inlands stuck to a traditional quest mode: the wizard could not open the mines, and hence the doorway home, because the talismanic stone Edwin wore for the majority of his life was reclaimed by the giant guardian who

was sworn to protect it. And so with the talisman went the power to dominate stone. Granum the wizard was left to guide these weary, grief-stricken travelers south, through a world that had seen its glory days and was now in the midst of its decay. This is where I had the most fun: I had creative freedom to manufacture a world from scratch with every footstep. I took these forlorn crusaders through a jungle of tangled brush called the Barrens, knowing full well the forest had been something magnificent before, but since Granum had used the stone to turn the Sordid Mountains into the Towers at the Inland's equator, the world had gone bleak and lifeless. I presented conflict with prodigious Hounds and Disney inspired pirates, who were in the woods collecting charcoal, a plot point that would later prove the dynamic growth of a character who had spent most of his time locked behind a fireplace with little to do but tweak rudimentary robots.

The Inlands was proving to be a world anyone would want to escape from; it was depressing to even write about, because I could sense a great history in this world that had been sucked into obscurity. So instead of relying on the world to garnish the narrative, I needed to return to my core characters and explore the option of their growth. I was told that was the mainline point of any story: the character had to keep growing, because stagnation would only remove the reader or viewer from the story. So I wondered what might happen if you should stumble into another world: would you become a different person? I came up with the theory that you could only exist as yourself in one world, and that defining characteristic would act as a bookmark once you left: upon entering the doorway into a new world, you became a different person. And since this book centered on a few important characters in a new world, I knew it was their story that was the most important because the transaction wasn't made by fluke. If it was then there would be no point in continuing...there had to be some design in the layout. I wasn't merely an author of some random accident. Jimmy and Cole had to be in the Inlands for a reason...which is why they could not leave. So I concentrated on Cole: I knew from the very beginning that this was his story, that if there was ever a central character, it had to be him. He started showing the signs of an oracle: he had dreams of the future, an idea that has been done to death, but which was only proving his growth and centrality to the tale. Jimmy, then, who was so athletic in the other world, would then prove his sportsman prowess with the sword and

become a Hunter in training. It fit. It gave them something to do other than follow Granum as the world opened around them to arouse their curiosity. I didn't want to spend the majority of the novel explaining what the flowers looked like.

As I wrote and wrote I couldn't help wondering what I was trying to accomplish here: I had written a couple hundred pages and there was no determined goal in sight. I knew where I was heading, in a sense, but I had only begun tackling the development of my characters. Cole was taking the reins of wizardry from Granum, Jimmy was showing his innate talent with the blade, and Edwin was stuck in a sub-conscious prison where memory was fleeting and he had no definition of self. How would Edwin wake up? I knew Cole would be involved, but I just could not see it happening any time soon because I had to juggle with the multi-world narratives. I thought I might have stepped into something I hadn't the talent or know-how to complete: I mean, this was a genre in which some of English's greatest writers had dabbled. Tolkien and Lewis. Even Stephen King had gone that route with *The Dark Tower*, and even he took nearly thirty years to complete the epic saga. Did this mean my own story would just keep on going, like that irritating little cylinder-bashing bunny Energizer sticks in every ad just to infuriate me? I didn't know. I knew this story wouldn't end with this book...not unless I wrote a thousand page behemoth, which demanded fully developed forearms of the reader should he or she wish to pick it up to read.

The idea of the trilogy had been superimposed in my brain since I'd first sat down to watch *Star Wars*: I probably hadn't a clue what trilogy even meant, but because the word was infused with the *Star Wars* hysteria, I knew the word must have been important. So maybe it was destiny...maybe it was fate that I should write a trilogy and join in the ranks of some of my favorite escapist treats: *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*...That is one list I would gladly join should readers' tastes necessitate it. So then the challenge of wrapping up this story disappeared like the briefest wisp of smoke. Now I could concentrate on the quest, on Cole's nascent magic and Lela's ever-maddening descent into anxiety and paranoia. Now I could ignore resolution and just enjoy the journey to nowhere, because for me, that's all it was...there was no end but whatever the future decided. When I write, I abide by that philosophy; there's no

sense worrying what your ideas will culminate into. That's for your future self to worry about...which is why, I've decided, I pushed so many integral plot points into the third book. Because I wasn't there yet...because the third book was undecided, was blank. It didn't exist yet, and so I didn't have to worry about it. I've already told you, I'm prone to nostalgic revisits over Buddhist contemplations about the future. Hell, I can hardly cross my legs when I sit, so trying to gather myself in a peaceful, ruminative position wouldn't even be worth it. For me it was just the NOW. Now Cole was becoming a figure of authority while Granum was becoming more human; now Jimmy was showing some acrobatic tendencies that belied his experience; now Edwin was unconscious but would awake with Cole's help in one of my favorite scenes in the book; now Maggie Krollup, the boys' mother, was stewing in the utter dismay and guilt of any woman whose children are missing; now Lela Saxon was starting to remember and confronts Dean Wach for the truth at gunpoint, in another pivotal scene I like to revisit if only for the sleek, tense dialogic exchange between the two; now the reality of interlapping worlds is starting to make more sense to me.

And that's where Chain of the Worlds (the most eye catching title of the bunch if you ask me) succeeds: it isn't about the beginning or end. It's the middle book of a trilogy that cares not about resolution but about the journey. I've always enjoyed flipping through the pages and learning even the most basic tenets of the Inlands' history and culture: I love reading Granum's interpretation of the civil war in the city between the royalists and the Hunters that opened the way for the invasion of the wolves. I love when Lela Saxon forces Dean Wach to explain the truth to Maggie Krollup in the very diner where she first learned about her murky memories, and I love how Dean becomes just another governmental puppet in an effort to obtain the very Hand of Nature that confidential stock footage shows Edwin Krollup using to open a mine into the ground where one can only imagine him extracting oil. I love the Watchers at the fork in the road, and the disquieting eeriness of the father with rocks for eyes, whose irascible nature would do anything to attain the Wizard's Blood. This is a book I enjoyed writing for the simple fact that I felt it was building up to something great. Here I was, peering through a window into this world where the very nature of fantasy was being studied, and I could do anything I wanted...I could go anywhere, be anyone. The

Inlands was my home away from home, and this book represented a period in my life where I was content with the now, for the end was just a worry for my future self. The one who might be in Law School, or digging trenches, that didn't matter. What mattered was that I had opened a doorway that would connect different parts of my growth for all time: I was one and the same as the man who wrote 'the end' after an exhausting rewrite of *The Traveling Man*, and the student who wrote 'Edwin Krollup was the richest man in town...' This was just the middling step of the gradual evolution of an aspiring writer.