

## A Dribble of Ink interviews Paul Kearney (June 2008)



**Paul, it's an honour to have you here on A Dribble of Ink! Thanks for taking the time to stop by and answer some questions. So let's get this thing going. Why do you write?**

Whoa, get right in there. I guess I don't have much of a choice. I write for the same reason other guys covet fast cars, or climb mountains. I don't have a say in it – it's just the way I am. Not to get too dreamy-eyed and new age about it, I can't imagine not writing, even if I weren't getting paid. I think most writers would probably say the same. When you get stuff down on the page, it's like you're preserving a little of yourself for posterity.

**So why choose Fantasy?**

It was what came naturally I guess. My first novel was about a guy who loses his wife in a climbing accident that is largely his own fault. It was set in the real world, in a nursing home and on Skye – it was as founded in reality as a book can be. But I just needed to add something to that story in order to really get across what I was trying to do. I needed some extra

spice or frisson to play against the mundane elements. I've always needed that in stories, I find. I don't think I have a kitchen-sink drama in me. I need that edge of the fantastical. Later on, when I went into epic fantasy, I enjoyed it because it allowed me to work with themes I found interesting in the real world, e.g Christianity and Islam, or religious intolerance, but I had the freedom to turn them around on their heads, because it was my world I was playing with, and I made the rules. Boy, that can be fun.

**Do you remember the first story you wrote?**

It was a full-length novel, God help us. I've never been one for short stories. I was sixteen years old, besotted with Tolkien and Stephen Donaldson, and so wrote a standard coming-of-age fantasy set in my own made-up world. I think it was about 125,000 words long, of which perhaps fifty were worth reading. But it taught me a lot. I didn't try to write another novel for five years, but the experience of handling such a long story stood me in good stead.

**What's one piece of advice you wish a young Paul Kearney, with his 124,950 bad words worth of novel, would have received?**

I'm not sure. My first impulse was to say; 'less is more,' as that's how I developed as I began to write professionally. I hate unnecessary waffle in books, stuff that obviously is there just to make the story that

little bit longer so that it'll fit into the idea of what fat fantasy should be. On the other hand, maybe that's the way I should have gone! I really don't know. The more I write, and learn about writing (I'm teaching creative writing now in Belfast, so I've got the old academic hat to wear now), the more I think that there's very little you can teach. You can point out what's wrong, but if the author doesn't have it in them to see why it's wrong, then you're on a hiding to nothing. Tell a story – that's the rather trite and obvious thing which must come out of it. Tell a story, and make the reader stick with it to the end. If you can do that, then you're well on your way...even if your prose is execrable. It's taken me a long time to realize that (or to admit it), but it's what I now believe.

### **How did you go from that first novel to finally becoming a published author?**

Whoa, long story. To cut it as short as courtesy allows, it has to do with Skye and mountains. I was there on a hiking trip 21 years ago (Good Lord, twenty years), and I took a little tumble off a cliff. When I came back to Oxford, where I was at college at the time, I had this idea in my head for a story about a man who does the same, except that in the fall his wife, who's with him, is killed. The story was to be about grief and death, and the process of creation; the climber was a fantasy author whose literary world was actually real, whose characters lived and breathed, and whose real-life grief was infecting the world he had created, effectively destroying it. So the characters of his books hunt him out to try and get him to put it to rights. The only problem is that one of the characters is based on his dead wife...

Well, I had about 100,000 words of this written, and sent it off to a few agents. The London agent John McLaughlin, bless his heart, took it on, and shortly after that, Richard Evans at Gollancz bought the book, and the rest is history. It was a remarkably straightforward process; I didn't write short stories or articles for magazines first, or go to conventions, or attend creative writing classes. I just wrote this book, and it was published. At the time I just thought that was how the system worked; now I realize how lucky I was.

### **Your breakup with Bantam was well publicized, even to the point where you were considering stepping away from writing completely. Now with almost a year's worth of time to contemplate, how do you look back on that time in your career and how have things changed since then?**

That was a weird time. I was proud of the books I wrote for Bantam, and intend to return to them soon. The advance I received for them was pretty big; by my standards anyway. I had great editors, which is hugely important, and I loved the story I was telling. The sales just weren't there though. When Bantam dropped me I was pretty taken aback. I thought that was it, period, because I'd never known another fantasy author who'd been dropped by his publisher in mid-series. I took a long hard look at what I was doing, and began to wonder if I hadn't been flogging a dead horse all these years. At that point, not one of my books was being reprinted, and most were in fact out of print in the English language. It shook me; I began to wonder if the loony feminist who e-mailed me a tirade calling me misogynistic and overly brutal might not have a point. Perhaps people just did not want to read the stuff I wrote, simple as that. If it had not been for Solaris, I'd be gainfully employed doing something very different. Publishing has changed so much in the last ten years; it's a whole new ball game from the rather gentlemanly trade I first encountered in the early nineties. I was beginning to wonder if I were not some stubborn relic, too set in my ways to change. Solaris is the perfect antidote.

**Word on the street has it that Patrick St. Denis (from Pat's Fantasy Hotlist) was a big factor in getting you setup with your new publisher; care to elaborate on how you and Solaris got together?**

Mark Newton sent me an e-mail out of the blue, asking if I'd like to write something for him. Apparently, he'd read about the Bantam saga on Patrick's blog. Patrick, if you're reading this, I owe you a beer! It was serendipity, manna from heaven, a shot in the arm; pick your metaphor. Just goes to show you – the internet is good for something after all...

**Any chance we'll see another novel in The Sea Beggars sequence?**

Yes. The last book, a long one, will tie up the whole story. It's provisionally entitled Storm of the Dead, but that may change. I'm actually hoping to get at it this year, and then Solaris want to publish the whole series as an omnibus. It's just a question of waiting for the rights to revert from Bantam; but believe me, that series will be finished, if I have to scribble it in my own blood.

**Earlier you mentioned that "loony feminist" called you misogynistic, a word also applied to many other fantasy authors including Tolkien and, more recently, Joe Abercrombie. What's your opinion concerning the accusations that the Fantasy/Science Fiction genres are so male dominated?**

Oh, give me a break. Male dominated? You've heard of a lass called Rowling I presume? Or what about Ursula le Guin, Andre Norton, Julian May, Katherine Kerr, Robin Hobb, and so many others I'll pause here and rein in my sneer. Male dominated, my big hairy behind. If anything, it's the other way round. For years fantasy has been fluffy and tiresome to a degree, and then along come people like Abercrombie and Erikson, and Morgan, and suddenly it's male dominated? I don't buy it. If anything, lately there's been a redressing of an imbalance, a lean towards dark, 'harder' fantasy which can only be good for the genre.

*(Crap, he thinks, there I go being misogynistic again...)*

**You're currently at work revising Ships From The West, the final novel of the Monarchies of God series, in preparation for the upcoming omnibus edition. What kind of work is going into this revision and why did it need to be done?**

I rushed the ending of Ships to meet a deadline, and some of the storyline feels a little truncated Also, some of the major characters within it were dispatched off-stage in a way which I thought was brutally realistic at the time, but which I regret now. Abeleyn, for example. I'm going to add some 10,000 words to the book, and smooth out a few of those wrinkles. However, the rewrite will not change any of the major plot-issues or the fate of the characters. What happened was meant to happen; I just think the way it was portrayed could be smoothed down a little.

**So fans of the Monarchies of God have as much reason to pick up the Omnibus as newcomers?**

Well, I hope so. Especially if Solaris do their usual bang-up brilliant job on the covers. I must admit, I'm drooling at the prospect myself.

**Can you speak about the legal troubles that delayed the release of the omnibus?**

It's pretty much a mystery to me. Berkeley have just been sitting with their thumbs up their asses for the better part of a year now. Legally, they have no right to be sitting on the books the way they are, and they've said they'll revert the titles without delay. They've been saying that for quite a while. I think it's just bureaucratic inertia to be honest. Still, things seem to be moving at last.

**What's something about Paul Kearney that most of his readers don't know?**

I can't sail. Despite all the nautical stuff in my books, I can't sail a boat for toffee. A couple of years ago I was in Israel and my Israeli publisher took me out in his yacht, a great sixty-foot brute of a thing. He naturally assumed I was a good sailor, and so I was put at the helm. I got the thing out to sea without sinking it, but it was a sweaty couple of hours...

**What can we expect from your upcoming novel, *The Ten Thousand*, being published by Solaris this September?**

It's a military story, basically detailing the life and times of an army, and set in an entirely new world, one which is based on the Persia of the Achaemenids, and the Greece of the fifth century BC. The book deals with racism in some detail, as the Macht and the Kufir are entirely alien to one another. Not to toot my own horn too hard, but there is at its heart the best battle I think I've ever written.

***The Ten Thousand* draws much inspiration from our own world history, what sort of things inspired *Monarchy of Gods* and *The Sea Beggars*?**

The Monarchies were inspired by the voyages of Columbus and Magellan. That world, that era, fascinates me. I like the fact that with that level of technology, I could have gunpowder and cold steel co-existing, and I could buckle a few swashes whilst layering on the darkneses of religion and heresy. Only the sixteenth century is that rich, that stuffed with revolutionary new ideas and technologies. Having said that, the tactics in a lot of the Monarchies battles also owe a lot to the American Civil War, another one of my hobby-horses,

As for the Sea Beggars, I basically wanted Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser on a ship, or something like that. But as I worked at it, all this darker stuff came seeping through, this relic of myth, and the idea of a world abandoned by God. The great thing about writing this stuff is that you can sling in whatever concept is interesting you at the time, and play with it, with a cast of thousands if needs be. No other profession provides that outlet.

**Which underread author, in your estimation, most deserves more attention by Fantasy/SF fans?**

There's a whole slew of them. John Crowley's *Little Big* is a masterpiece, as is pretty much anything by Alan Garner. Both of them knock Philip Pullman into a cocked hat. Mary Renault's Alexander trilogy still makes the hair rise on the back of my neck every time I read it. It's historical, but makes the society of ancient Greece so alien and strange that it seems more like science fiction. Graham Joyce should also be more widely known. When I think of the fat-backed books that line the shelves of airport bookshops...

**Maps are currently a hot topic in the blogosphere/message board scene. What are your thoughts on maps in Fantasy novels. Necessary to the story, extra fluff or somewhere in between?**

I love maps. I am a map-drawer, a cartographic nerd. The first thing I do when starting a new book is draw a map, even if it's not going to appear in the published work. It helps me sort out my ideas, and slots characters into space and time. If, as I do, you're writing pretty frequently about journeys, about campaigns and marches, then you have to have some kind of reference tool to hold it all together and make sense of the world. The more the merrier I say. I've loved them ever since poring over *Treasure Island* as a boy.

**Are you the type of author who pores over the Internet, searching for every last drop of Paul Kearny \*coughjoeabercrombiecough\*, or do you mostly avoid the hype and media?**

Nope. Couldn't give a monkey's bottom. I have a website, but I was basically bullied into setting it up by a few friends. I don't go to conventions as a rule, and I'm not really up to date with who's writing what or being published by whom. I just write the damn things – as far as I'm concerned the rest is up to the publisher...

Ah, but times are changing though. The author has to clamber down from his little ivory tower these days and mix it up with the great unwashed in order to promote his opus. So I hear, anyway. Actually, I like hearing from fans, and I always make a point of replying to their e-mails. It's just that fandom per se makes me uncomfortable. The last time I was at a convention, a big one, I was torn between feeling utterly at home, in a crowd of people who were all interested in the same things I was, and feeling totally perplexed by the sheer passion they brought to it. They seemed to care more about the stuff writers were writing than the writers did themselves, if you know what I mean.

**How did growing up in Northern Ireland affect you as a writer?**

It made religion a major part of my make-up, for good or ill. I'm pretty much an agnostic these days; one of those dithering hopeful folk who would like there to be a God but who can't quite bring themselves to buy into the whole nine yards. It made me hate organized religion to quite a degree, as people were getting killed over it every day as I was growing up. We used to have Catholic versus Protestant fights at the bus station after school, which was fun at the time, but not really a symptom of a sane society.

Having said that, I grew up in a rural environment which was largely at a distance from the troubles of the cities. I detailed it pretty faithfully in *A Different Kingdom*, my second book – still the best thing I've ever written. I grew up with horses and cattle and open fields and deep woods a stroll from my back door, and you can't ask for much more than that in childhood. (Now the woods have been cut down, the fields covered with housing estates, and the cattle have foot and mouth, but it was good while it lasted.)

It's odd, but I moved away from Northern Ireland for a good number of years, and when I came back, the 'war' was over; yet strangely enough, society seemed more fractured and fractious than ever. Terrorism went down, and drug addiction went up. Go figure. In any case, I'm a product of that country, and would not have grown up anywhere else for the world.

Well, maybe the Bahamas. That would have been nice.

**You've written many novels since *A Different Kingdom*, but in your opinion none of them have reached the same level of quality. What made *A Different Kingdom* so special and do you think you'll ever write a novel to match it?**

*Kingdom* is my most autobiographical novel, the book I let my heart run away with. There are characters in it based on members of my family – I didn't even change some of the names. It's set on my grandparents' farm, ostensibly in the fifties, but actually based as I remember it from the early seventies. That was a hell of a fine place to spend a childhood. I had fifteen uncles and aunts, and a few dozen cousins, and a whole wide and quiet country to run around in, winter and summer. Something went into that book which I never really recaptured again. A kind of love. It's a fairy story, and it's not for the faint-hearted, but at its essence it's about the love for the land, for a piece of Ireland which is now destroyed. I don't know if I can ever write with that fathomless sense of belonging again; after all, you can only grow up once. But I'm glad I drew a picture of that world I knew, while it was still fresh in my mind.

**Paul, it was a pleasure. I've no doubt that *Solaris* and yourself will continue to move the genre forward. Best of luck with *The Ten Thousand* and anything else that finds you down the road.**

Well, thanks very much Aidan. As my brother says, keep her between the hedges.