

I always knew the third book would be the hardest to write. I kept pushing material back and back until it eclipsed the berms of the first and second books, so going into this last novel was sort of like going into an exam where all of the content you pored over the night before wants to burst from your head...but the moment you sit down and take out the 2B pencil, every aspect of that information you thought you knew sort of just disintegrates. There was a lot of expectation with this one...this was the book that had to spell everything out. I'm not a writer who follows an outline, so I would be learning the very minutiae of the Inlands along with the reader. There were certain questions that needed answering in this book: what are the Inlands? What is Cole supposed to do? Why is all of this happening? These were the generalized questions, the questions whose solutions would be the most difficult to figure out. The underlying questions that would drive the actual narrative were far too numerous to count: what would happen once Edwin and Granum confronted the Guardian of the Stone? Would Maggie Krollup find her kids? Would Jimmy fall ever deeper into Haspin's trap? These questions loomed rampant in the nascent plot, but I had to search for a perfect beginning. The book had to open with a pop. I had already dealt with exposition: the reader knew these characters. That was the sweetest thing about working in a trilogy: at this point in the quest, the characters had been fleshed out enough to ignore the expositional detail a writer finds extremely tedious but can't ignore for the sake of the actual story. Here I could get the ball rolling.

I asked my dad where he thought I should start: he was truly the first that ever glanced at my stories before they even hit a second draft. He was familiar with the arc, and had provided feedback during the entire creative process. He told me Cole was truly the central character, and that I should start with him. I agreed, but Cole was stuck in a hesitant position that wouldn't control the opening of the story with enough pop: he knew Stedrot was aware that he had the wizard's blood, and he could tell Jimmy's lustful precocity was forcing him closer to a little temptress whose appearance, though beautiful, was just a facade over an otherwise manipulative hag. I wanted to start with blood, and that got me thinking to the end of Isabella's storyline in *Chain of the Worlds*: she was denying her father and his part in the devil's prophecy, and by doing so she forcibly turned her back on her fateful purpose in order to return to Edin and fight the wolves. In the first draft of

the book this became the prologue. I ventured back to that little town whose sole purpose was to avoid the varying corruption of the outside world, sequestering themselves in an alcove against God's Mountain in an effort to sanctify their existence. This book would become a quasi-commentary on the nature of God, and the meaning humanity attributes to Him...but that would be layered deep in the subtext. There would be overt examples, of course, but I didn't want the tome to read as religious.

Even as I write this I'm struck with an almost spiritual enlightenment that would play better as irony now that I think about. I return to every story before it will reach the printing press: I go over every aspect of the narrative with an objective pen and scrap what I hate and rewrite what needs explanation or further exploration. That was rather simple with the first two books because their essential nature was far more straightforward than the third book. The third book has been called confusing by some younger readers, and I have to apologize to them, but at the same time, the version they got to read has an overwhelming clarity I busted my back to reveal. The first draft of *The Traveling Man* was enormous. During a few of the initial edits, I pared nearly fifty pages of bulk...and this is 12 font, single-spaced on Microsoft Word bulk I'm talking about. There were areas in the book I don't even like to reminisce about because it seemed I had written them under a drug-induced haze. My only problem is: I've never touched drugs. Anyway, I finished the book in January 2005. I remember this distinctly because it was my final year in school and the sense of accomplishment that followed writing the epitaph THE END was greater even than receiving the diploma my future self would find in the mail. *Chain of the Worlds* was released in January 2006, and at this time I knew I wanted to get the third book out pronto in an effort to hasten the conclusion of the series for readers. My wife and I were also looking into going to New York to be part of the Book Expo in May. So I settled in my writing chair and took to a new keyboard that had had no part in the initial creation of *The Inlands Trilogy*. I opened the Word file and began reading from page 1. I re-wrote the prologue to include a brief insight into the Arthur character. I re-wrote the pivotal meeting between Cole and the Muse...and transformed the character of Gogol. By the time I reached the final page I knew I'd made the book the way I'd always intended for it to read. The story seemed smoother now. But as irony should have

it, in an effort to combat viruses in my computer, I transferred the newly edited novel into an external hard drive in order to protect it while my computer was being reformatted. And then, as if reality were mirroring fiction, the story was gone. It was no longer on my hard drive or the external port. I was sweating. I remember that even now, when I can look back at the episode with the strange fascination awarded by retrospect. It was just...gone. I couldn't sleep that night. I sent the hard drive into a specialist who could not find even a remnant of the file that would prove it even existed. It was as if Gogol had erased the Inlands in real life the same way he was trying to demolish it in my book. The difference was, in real life he had succeeded.

I was stuck with an enormous task: I had to fish out the first draft of the book and re-write the damn thing in order to ensure I would have a finished copy for the Book Expo in New York. The stress that went into the revision was like no other I had ever tried to confront. I had just gotten off the high of perfecting the story, and here I was wading through the muck of a first draft I'd wished never to revisit again. The sense that Gogol was somehow looming over my shoulder, breathing down my neck seemed realer now than ever. But it made me approach the story with an open-minded effort. Before I had been reticent to certain changes, but now, now I was under the assumption that I might have lost the last edit of the novel because it truly wasn't ready, and that my confidence in its completion was premature. It was almost as if I was re-writing the entire book again, and the very fact that I could spend more time in the Inlands was exhilarating. I'd forgotten how much fun this world was to play with. All of a sudden that dour, mean-spirited frustration that initially propelled the revision of this book turned into a fascinating re-tooling of something I'd completed two years before. Now I could really change everything that bothered me: nothing was set in stone. This was a world that had left God behind. In a very real sense, that was why the world needed saving. It was as simple as that, yet in the first draft I'd gotten bogged down in philosophical ideas that really had no place in my universe: ideas like Platonism, and post-Structuralism, ideas that had been infused in my psyche while I was doing my degree and had been influenced by these Leftist approaches to literature.

Now my mind was left free to roam the Inlands unfettered by academia. I always had trouble with two areas of my book, and these areas always proved the most confusing. The first of which was: what are the Inlands? In the first draft the Inlands was a story, and the mines acted as a doorway into this other world: Gogol was actually a metaphor for Writer's Block, whose sole purpose was to gnaw at the imagination until there were no stories left to tell. But this idea never came across with any clarity: I always thought by masking the true intent it would force the reader to interpret the multi-faceted layers to reveal his or her own meaning. This was the result of my interests in Derrida's deconstructionism. But no reader purchases a fantasy novel, especially one meant to conclude two other books, only to reveal the solution to the mystery of the entire series was itself shrouded by even more mystery. It would do more than test the reader's patience...it would force the reader to bludgeon the author to death should the two ever meet for being such a mean practical joker. No, and then the very tagline came to my mind as I edited that really created the umbrella brand under which the entire trilogy came to rest: what if Middle Earth was real?

I had initially bandied that idea about years before but it never came to fruition, but now, now it made the most sense of all. *Lord of the Rings* inspired me to even try fantasy in the first place, so why not include the tome in my own trilogy? So what had at first been only a story turned into a real world: the Inlands and Middle Earth were two worlds on the brink of destruction whose survival relied on the help of an author. Arthur Franklin and J.R.R. Tolkien. I think I smiled as I wrote because it made the entire crusade in all three books purposeful: if none of it was real, was there really any care if some fictitious world was saved? I didn't know...an old part of me probably thought so, but I figured if Dashun and Pais were real boys, their survival would mean more than some textual alternatives. So my purpose in writing this trilogy was to prove how important Cole and company were in restoring this world as it fell more and more into obscurity, for the man who was meant to save the world by writing its story and therefore immortalizing its place in the Chain was growing haunted by nightmares as Gogol's presence became more prominent. Cole played the Christ-figure to Arthur's God...but Arthur was not God, and that was the driving point. Arthur was God's troubleshoot, because imagination had turned into a magnet against which

falling worlds attracted. The same happened with Middle Earth, I can only guess. As Sauron came to prominence, some ailing whisper came to Tolkien's ear and he could only write what he either saw or heard in order to keep from going crazy. The idea lent far more credence to Dean Wach's agency, T.I.F., because now these fantastic ideas the government was trying to keep covered actually supported the idea that other worlds existed, and that they inspired the haunted tales of our world because some author had peered through the holes and written what he or she had seen as a means to stave off insanity. The idea grew clearer and clearer to me, and the entire backstory of the Inlands turned into what I call a tug-of-war between God and the Devil. But the war turned into one designated only by humanity, for it was choice and only choice which dictated belief in Mystic, and once mankind found no place for God in their worship, Mystic could do nothing but fade into memory. And that's what Cole's purpose became. He was the White: a means to redeem mankind in God's eye.

But like any Christ-figure in any story, the metaphor is never complete unless there is self-sacrifice. I think the hardest re-write for me came at the end of the book. *The Traveling Man* was a story that was supposed to culminate into a final war. The Great War, I guess you can call it, and as I wrote the first draft I could just picture what would happen in this battle. The pirates would be involved, fighting side by side with royalists and civilians. The Four Horsemen would be flying around, using their Herculean strength to decimate the world. But as I got closer and closer to this war, I couldn't help but wonder how it would pan out since the book had become so character driven. And it was. The novel was character-centric, and had become my means to further explore the dynamics of each character: his or her wants and dreams. My brother told me after having read the book that *The Traveling Man* was his favorite of the bunch, but being a budding and very talented filmmaker he could not help but read each tale with the thought of structuring each book like a movie. He told me the third book would be the hardest to turn into a film, and I don't disagree with him at all simply for the fact that a big part of the novel takes place in Edwin Krollup's sub-conscious mind, where Cole and Edwin chase out his inner-demons and attempt to finally cleanse him of his deep-rooted need for the stone. I actually love this entire section, especially when Cole walks into Edwin's childhood room...I had actually based

Edwin's childhood home on my own, and could only imagine it while I typed. The nostalgia in me yearned to return to the place, and I just thought it was neat to do so with my characters. When I did finally reach the Great War, I couldn't even concentrate on its details because none of my major characters were really in the center of it. Cole and Jimmy were freeing slaves from the Hub. Edwin Krollup was waiting for his step-sons at the reservoir in a trap set up by Gogol to finally confront the boy who possessed the White. Dean Wach and Lela Saxon (characters I struggled for a long time with considering I could not figure out what to do with them since they seemed like unneeded baggage) were busy shutting the doorway in the mines to impede anyone else from entering the Inlands. The war was a sort of sideshow, but I liked it that way. I'm sure it peeved some readers, but it works better as something happening off-stage because the threat of it seems realer. I'm not sure why, exactly, but when I read, the sounds of gunfire thumping through the ground comes across as more authentic than if we were actually in the middle of it all. It's the bystander approach, I like to call it.

So I came to the final confrontation between Cole and the Traveling Man. The war actually hinged on this conflict. And I thought the first draft handled this confrontation very poorly because it essentially destroyed everything I tried to create about Gogol. He was supposed to exist in a form like Voldemort in the early *Harry Potter* books, like an idea whispered about in the shadows. His true form was destroyed in the war against Mystic and the Wizards, so he existed as a ghost in the machine, taking different forms and vessels throughout the ages as he prepared the Inlands for end times by promulgating his prophecies. But in the first draft, when Cole finally confronts him, I turned Gogol into a dragon...a dinosaur, giving him a form he logically should not have been able to create. But I thought the imagery would have seemed cool. Even in the re-write, the one I'd imagined had perfected the book but which was lost in the mix of using an external hard drive, kept Gogol's true form as an enormous dinosaur. And I guess I can thank the lucky stars that my computer decided to turn on me at that point. Because Gogol needed to destroy Cole as a means to further evolve: it was his crusade from the beginning to rid the world of the White, of all good, and he nearly succeeded merely by introducing to the world the subject of free will, which ultimately created the polarity between good and evil. Only Cole stood in his way. So I re-

wrote the entire chapter called ‘The Bargaining Room’, and my re-write turned into my favorite part of the book. It seemed like a real climax now. Gone was some of the goofy dialogue that plagued the Gogol character (for I imbued him a sense of foresight, and the fact that he’d been to and destroyed many worlds along the Chain gave him and his speech certain aspects of each culture he’d briefly been a part of). Gone was the dinosaur. The chapter became tense. I often just pick up the book to read the chapter. I think it was always the way I’d intended the book to end. I know my brother once told me to write a longer ending, something akin to the filmic *Return of the King* which painstakingly closed off each storyline, but I paradoxically kept my ending brief. I thought it worked better that way. It didn’t need a twenty page epilogue telling the reader what exactly each character had done with his or her lives since the Inlands had been saved. I liked the simple imagery of Edwin holding out his arms to his new family, since that was what the trilogy had ultimately sought to redeem for Jimmy and Cole: the reconnection to a father-figure. And the fact that Leo was there in the end, going to embrace the very man who had imprisoned him behind his fireplace proved that Edwin had fully redeemed himself. I absolutely loathed the epilogue J.K. Rowling wrote in her fantastic concluding novel to the *Harry Potter* series because it seemed so detracting and over-bloated with superfluous detail the story didn’t call for. But I suppose she thought she needed to end an otherwise dark book with a little brightness, so I guess I should commend her for that.

So I here I sit now. I’m holding a copy of *The Traveling Man*, and I cannot help but notice how thick the novel is. It’s like trying to read a cinder block. The cover of the book, a minimalistic look at Gogol peering over the Crimson Bead, his face iridescent and his eyes like jelly, sometimes gives me goosebumps, and I suppose I can only thank my illustrator, the very talented Matt Low, for showing me his tangible interpretation of something only I’d been privy to in my imagination. Just seeing my name on the front made the effort seem worth it. A young reader emailed me with aspirations of becoming a reader himself and I could do nothing but encourage him, flattered that I had even brought the pronouncement from him. I wonder if I had become the same author to him that Stephen King is to me: it certainly is a self-aggrandizing thought, but it really capitalizes my achievement. I never started writing in 2002 assuming I would have

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three books in just as many years. I started writing simply because I thought it would be fun to try: there was no goal other than the satisfaction that comes with creativity. I wrote hoping my wife, my family would someday enjoy my stories: I wrote simply to retain the imagination of my childhood. I started this series of essays letting you know how nostalgic I am, and at the very heart of everything I've done is the simple guidance of a young boy who once wished he would pitch for the Boston Red Sox. Sure, the dream's changed, but not the wide-eyed enjoyment of the one aspiring to achieve it. Well, I should go. I'm in another world now. A place called Garlan, and I promise it's just as dangerous as the Inlands.