

SECRETS OF THE DRAGON RIDERS

*Your Favorite Authors on
Christopher Paolini's Inheritance Cycle*

Edited by James A. Owen
with Leah Wilson

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www.teenlibris.com

Developed for Borders, Inc., by BenBella Books, Inc.

Send feedback to feedback@benbellabooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Secrets of the dragon riders : your favorite authors on Christopher Paolini's Inheritance cycle / edited by James A. Owen, with Leah Wilson.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-9792331-6-X

1. Paolini, Christopher. Inheritance. 2. Fantasy fiction, American—History and criticism. I. Owen, James A. II. Wilson, Leah.

PS3616.A55Z87 2008

813'.6—dc22

2008014385

Proofreading by Erica Lovett and Stacia Seaman

Cover art by Ralph Voltz

Cover design by Laura Watkins

Text design and composition by PerfectType, Nashville, TN

Printed by Victor Graphics, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Drawing Out the Dragons

James A. Owen

*When I get a little money I buy books;
and if any is left I buy food and clothes.*

—ERASMUS

That quote by Desiderus Erasmus is usually mentioned, wryly, by someone who doesn't share Erasmus' point of view about someone who does. I'm so far in the latter category I can't even *see* the other side. I am utterly addicted to print, and am physically incapable of passing a newsstand, bookstore, or secondhand shop without giving the books on display at least a cursory glance. More often than not (which means practically every single time) I make some kind of a purchase, and for a moment that new book might as well have been under a Christmas tree for all the love I foster on it.

To a lot of people, it might seem as if my priorities are a bit skewed—but I'm really just engaging in something as old as

humanity itself: I'm searching for connections to everything and everyone around me. And buying books is the best way I know to do that because books, and more precisely stories, are as important and vital and essential as food and clothes—and I'm not entirely convinced about the clothes.

Stories are what bind us together as families, and communities, and cultures. Stories are what connect us to our past, anchor us in our present, and lay the groundwork for the future. Stories are how we communicate understanding to one another both literally and through metaphor. And as one essayist in this collection noted, stories are important because none of them are new. All stories have already been told—only our point of view changes. And it is that unique point of view that makes every story at once individual and collective. Our differences make us interesting—but our similarities make us family. And that brings me to the story—and stories—of Christopher Paolini.

It was the stunning blue-visaged dragon painted by John Jude Palencar that first caught my attention. I've always considered myself an artist who writes rather than the other way around, so it was the design of the book jacket for *Eragon* that drew my eye before I cared one iota about reading the book itself. It wasn't until the next book *Eldest*, with its matching red dragon, appeared that I really paid attention—and still, it wasn't to read the books, but to take note of an interesting cultural trend: dragons were cool.

Not that dragons hadn't always been cool—but usually they were cool to a subset of fans of a genre (fantasy) that most people considered, well, juvenile. So when a book set firmly within that

genre was marketed to that exact audience (juvenile readers) to amazing and continuing success, dragons suddenly became cool to people who had never liked them before, or who had but didn't realize it until *Eragon* came along. It was icing on the cake that the author of this literary fireball was himself barely old enough to drive. And suddenly, everyone in the world seemed to be reading books with dragons on the covers.

Having been one of that previous subset of readers, I already knew dragons were cool, which was one of the reasons I had written and drawn a book called *Here, There Be Dragons*. But it can only be chalked up to happy convergence (rather than astute planning) that my book (featuring a dragon on the cover, colored blue at the request of my publisher's sales and marketing department) happened to be published just as the *Eragon* movie promotions were getting underway and every bookstore worthy of the name was assembling displays of books featuring dragons—including mine.

(The fact that Owen and Paolini sit next to each other alphabetically has resulted in a running joke among booksellers that I owe Chris dinner any time he asks, since *he* helped sell so many of *my* books. This became less of a joke and more of a potential accounting concern when my second book, *The Search For The Red Dragon*, appeared with a [naturally] red dragon on the cover. I would like to state for the record that there was espionage, research, and prayer involved in planning to make my next book, *The Indigo King*, purple so it would not match up with the gold cover of *Brisingr*, which is Chris's third book. At the rate we're already selling, though, I'm going to be picking up his dinner tab until he's forty.)

My love for the cover art aside, it became a matter of professional courtesy to read the books and discover for myself just what all the hubbub was about. So I did. And amidst the thrilling tales of dragons and elves and hero's journeys I found something else in Christopher Paolini's books—I found myself.

A lot has been made about Paolini's relative youth, to which I can relate. I was writing, drawing, and publishing my own comic books at the age of sixteen—and while I did not enjoy the same early and vast success nor endure the same harsh scrutiny that he has had to grapple with at such a tender age, I can empathize to a degree that many others cannot. I was the youngest publisher to ever exhibit at the San Diego Comic-Con—and I was constantly questioned, not because of my professionalism or the quality of my work, but because of my age. Had he been less persistent and not gotten the publishing deal he did, or had his books not been so commercially successful, Paolini might well have had an easier time of it. Under the glare of so much scrutiny, even praise has a certain kind of weight, because with success comes expectations, and life is difficult enough at fifteen without being world-famous to boot.

But whatever else critics might question, the achievement itself, to have written (and published) so young, is worthy of note. It requires an innate maturity to be able to convey so much in a work of fiction when one has had relatively less life experience. (It should also be noted—and is utterly appropriate—that two of the finer essays in this collection are written by authors who are as young [or even younger] now as Paolini was when he first conceived *Eragon*.)

The story itself is one that has been both lauded and criticized as “not new.” More than one essayist touches on this concept, that Paolini has drawn upon well-known and well-used archetypes for both character and plot. Paolini’s detractors claim that the work is therefore merely derivative, and brings nothing new to the world of fiction. But his advocates (of which I am one) maintain that he has simply done what all the great authors have done before him: retold the stories common to us all from a unique point of view. And it is a point of view that has been embraced by millions upon millions of readers around the world.

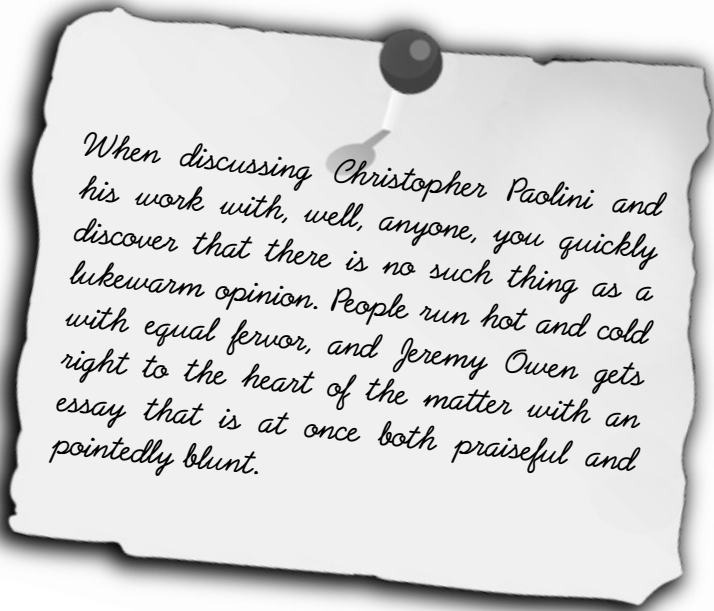
The question has been posed whether the story of Eragon is also the story of Christopher Paolini. I maintain that it might be—but the same can be said of us all, writers and readers alike. We write to express how we see things to the rest of the world, and we read to try to make sense of the world around us. Both are efforts to communicate, to make connections with the larger Story. Our dragons are metaphors, used to tie together the things we know and the things we hope to understand. Readers may find themselves drawing close to Eragon or Saphira, or perhaps Roran, and in the process discovering something about themselves. It’s been no different for any other story that’s gone before, whether it’s a tale of Perceval or Gilgamesh or even Luke Skywalker. They are all the same story. They are all our story. And the tales told in the Inheritance Cycle are our stories, too, told as they are by a storyteller who understands this, and put them into words in the way he believes they should be told.

That’s how the best stories work: They are new and familiar all at once. The book you now hold in your hands is an excellent

example of this: a group of essays by writers who are doing the same thing as Christopher Paolini, and myself, and every other writer throughout history—telling stories, making connections, and trying to communicate their own unique points of view.

Ten Things About Christopher Paolini

Jeremy Owen



When discussing Christopher Paolini and his work with, well, anyone, you quickly discover that there is no such thing as a lukewarm opinion. People run hot and cold with equal fervor, and Jeremy Owen gets right to the heart of the matter with an essay that is at once both praiseful and pointedly blunt.

Go to a library, bookstore, or better yet, any gathering of people who consider themselves writers and say two words: Christopher Paolini. Try it. It gives amazing results with very little effort on your part. The polarizing effect is instantaneous; a group of mild-mannered bookish types will transform into two ravening

gangs right before your eyes. The pro-Paolini element will square off against the anti-Paolini in seconds. Make sure you're outside the danger zone before the insults and occasional breakable objects start flying around.

You've probably already heard some of the pro arguments, possibly even read some in the volume you're holding, but those aren't the arguments I want to single out. I want to look at the opposition. You've heard what they have to say before, only in reference to other authors. But with the addition of Paolini to the mix the contentions take on a new, frenzied tone. I don't know if it's Paolini's youth or quick ascension to lofty status that makes people dislike him, but everybody seems to have at least one point against him. I've listed the strongest ones below.

Ten Reasons Why People Hate Christopher Paolini

1) Youth

Christopher Paolini is young. He's older now than when he started *Eragon*, but he's still young. Most people expect sixteen-year-old boys to be babbling, hormone-riddled morons who think a pronoun is a noun that's lost its amateur status. For the most part these derogatory thoughts about adolescent males are right. A teenage boy being able to string a coherent list of words into a recognizable sentence is noteworthy, and Christopher Paolini did that ten thousand times . . . in a row! Brilliant! Most people, especially other writers, tend to see that as an overachievement for someone his age. I don't think this is Christopher's fault, but that of the observer judging him. If you think Christopher Paolini is too young, then you must be too old. Wait

a while. Christopher will age with time, and you might find it easier to deal with him when he's thirty.

2) Completion

Christopher Paolini finished a novel. Here's a revelation that stuck in the craw of many a writer. People love saying they write for a living. It sounds distinguished, professional, praiseworthy. After the fact that they are a writer is established, it is often followed by the question, "So what did you write?" If you're the person asking the question I hope you have quick reflexes. Like the actors that serve you dinner, many writers are biding time at their day job whilst waiting for their big break. Said break will probably never happen if they keep writing online fanfiction about Kirk and Spock in romantic situations. If you hate Christopher Paolini because he wrote a novel, it's probably time to stop doing Internet "research" on the computer in your mom's basement and start taking a serious stab at that outline you've toyed with for a decade.

3) Continuation

Christopher Paolini wrote a second novel. A person in the same situation as Christopher has thoughts like this: "I made it. My first book is published and doing well and the publisher wants my second manuscript." If this is you, brace yourself, because here it comes. You'll be walking around the grocery store, casually comparing prices on cans of beets, when you get it for the first time. The tap on the shoulder. "Hey buddy," they'll say, "remember me? From high school?" Often you do in fact remember them and the memories are not fond ones. "Saw your book," they continue, "it's

doing real good.” I like to call the previous statement the butter-up; it’s the precursor to the real reason you hold a now-forgotten can of \$1.79 whole baby beets in your hand. “Say, I had a great *idea*. . . .” Flee in terror! Quick! Before the idea leaves their lips! It’s your only hope! There is no reasoning with the person before you. Stating the fact that you already have too many of your own ideas to pursue does not deter them. They mention that the hard part is already done, you just have to write the book, and they’ll share the profits with you! With as much decorum as possible, extricate yourself from the situation, saying you’ll have to go over it with your agent and get back to them. From this point on you will spend the rest of your life checking to make sure their car isn’t in the parking lot when you go shopping. If you hate Christopher Paolini because he managed to write a second book, a book that is not about the idea you flung at him as he rushed from the Piggly-Wiggly, stop. Take a minute to evaluate how good your idea really is. If you’re still satisfied that it’s a good story, do us all a favor and take the night course offered at your local community college on how to write a novel. It’s the only surefire way for everyone to win.

4) Success

Christopher Paolini wrote a bestselling novel. People that aspire to be writers will sing praises to such a person, all the while shooting little daggers with their eyes at them for accomplishing such a feat. Christopher was in the right place at the right time with the right publisher doing the right promotions with the right spin and it paid off. He has a bestselling novel. You probably don’t. If you hate Christopher Paolini because he wrote a best-

seller, well, you're pretty much stuck with the taste of bile in the back of your throat every time you think of him. I know lots of great authors who are not bestsellers. Hitting the top of the lists is a convergence of skill, publicity, and timing. Sometimes series don't hit their stride until the fourth or fifth book. Sometimes being a bestseller is more of a pain than a blessing. If it still bothers you that he hit the right combination so young, content yourself with the knowledge that young geniuses burn out fast. (Not really, but it made you feel better for a bit, didn't it?)

5) Hollywood

Christopher Paolini's novel got made into a movie. This is the true lottery win of the writer, but not without its drawbacks. The novel the writer worked on with love and devotion for so long is being rewritten by someone trying to hack enough out of it so it fits within two hours of screen time. Sure, Christopher got a great paycheck and is probably getting residuals from the deal, but the movie is almost never as good as the book. It's hard to see something you spent so much time working on reduced and reworked in such a manner when you have only extreme financial stability to show for it. If you hate Christopher Paolini because of the money he made from selling out to Hollywood, then I'm right there with you. If you happen to be Christopher Paolini's agent and are reading this, then you can contact me through the publisher of this article. I've got some great ideas I think you'd be interested in.

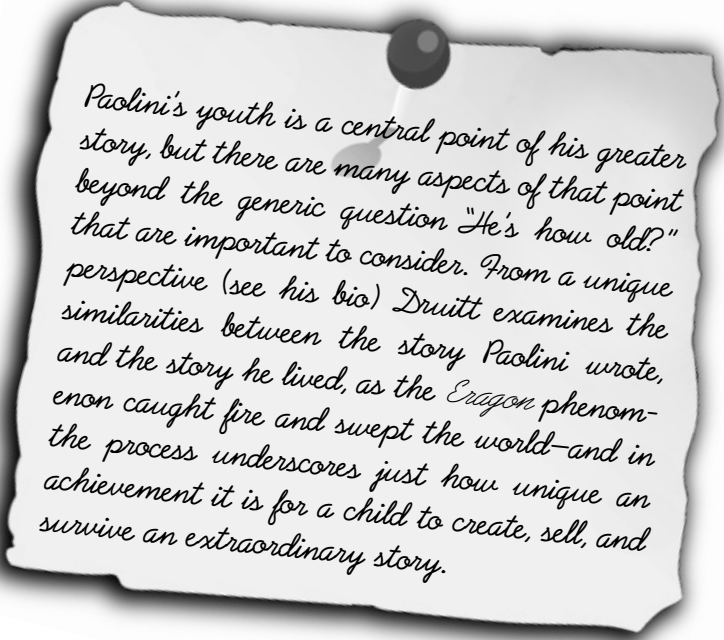
6) Tempo

One of the things people picked out to criticize about Paolini's writing was the pacing. The story seemed to drag, they'd say;

Riding the Dragon

The Child as Author

Tobias Drutt



*Paolini's youth is a central point of his greater story, but there are many aspects of that point beyond the generic question "He's how old?" that are important to consider. From a unique perspective (see his bio) Drutt examines the similarities between the story Paolini wrote, and the story he lived, as the *Eragon* phenomenon caught fire and swept the world—and in the process underscores just how unique an achievement it is for a child to create, sell, and survive an extraordinary story.*

Eragon, as most reading this know, is the story of a fifteen-year-old boy who gets a dragon's egg by accident. When the dragon hatches, he bonds to it and becomes its "Rider." But his problems have only just begun. He is living in a kingdom governed by the

evil Galbatorix, a Rider who wiped out all the other Riders and dragons apart from the thirteen evil Riders who had joined him, their dragons, and three eggs. So when evil servants of the evil king kill Eragon's uncle (with whom he is living because his mother mysteriously disappeared after his birth, and never named his father), Eragon specifically sets out to get revenge, though he has other motives too. The book was published internationally in 2004 but had been published at the author Christopher Paolini's home before, in 2002. Like his hero, Paolini was fifteen when he began writing it (though he was nineteen at the time of its international publication by Knopf).

What I find interesting in the bald story of *Eragon* is that the book contains an obvious symbol of the process of its own creation. The plot concerns a *child*, a child learning something he would not otherwise know about or know how to do. Just as Eragon in the book learns about riding and looking after dragons, so Paolini learned about writing, and about publishing and self-promotion. Both of these sets of skills—dragon care and writing—are things you would not expect a child to do, let alone (alas, the prejudice against the young creeps stealthily in here) be good at. The world of *Eragon* is just as surprised at the boy's maturity as the world of books was at Paolini's achievement. No wonder, then, that there is a clear parallel between the dragon, Saphira, and the story itself. I cannot say what Paolini's experience of writing was like, but I can say from my own experience of writing that, like Saphira, stories do have a tendency to come up with ideas of their own about where they want to go, and it is very hard to get them to change their minds. They take you on

long flights, and you don't always know where or when those flights will end.

There are other parallels between dragon-rearing and writing. Both of them are enjoyable and make you feel as if you have a special and secret identity that makes you different from other people, even your family. Most people think both sound really great. But just as most writers can tell starry-eyed dreamers about the negative side of being an author, so Paolini shows that being a Dragon Rider has a downside: Dragons are uncomfortable to ride, and your specialness attracts lots of attacks. As well, the dragon eventually grows beyond your control, as books do when they go out into the world . . . no writer can control the way a book is going to be read. Just as there are other, older writers, so there are other, older Dragon Riders for Eragon to meet. And riding a dragon, like writing, is in some respects a leveling experience: Small children can make up really brilliant stories, and a teenager like Eragon is boosted to adult status by owning a powerful dragon. As another essay in this volume shows, Eragon's youth doesn't stop him winning arguments with his elders, and often being right.

As for the sequel, the very title says that it's all about age. *Eld-est* is the oldest dragon alive in the world, Glaedr. (The word *eld-est* might also refer to Murtagh, Eragon's older brother. They are both fathered by evil Morzan.) Glaedr and his Rider Oromis are authority figures for Eragon, and train him to be a Rider. They learn an ancient magical language (echoes of Le Guin and Tolkien) and Saphira learns combat flying. Education, education, education! Glaedr and Oromis replace Eragon's parents as authority

figures. Is this to do with Paolini himself breaking free of the parental help he stresses so heavily in the acknowledgments to *Eragon*? Philip Pullman says that everyone's story begins only when they realize they've been born into the wrong family. This is *Eragon's* story too.

But while all this is true and very important, the point I find interesting in the story of *Eragon* is the age of its author. I will now attempt to explain why.

We are, so very often, told that we are at the pinnacle of freedom. Every adult can vote, has rights, yet those rights are not completely unrestricted so as to preserve the rights of others. But this is all a rather glorified lie. We are not at the pinnacle of freedom yet. There is one last group, one final minority everywhere, that has not achieved the rights and responsibilities that normally come with freedom.

Children.

They have no political rights, and are condemned for working, just as women were fifty and a hundred years ago. (Being condemned for working goes with low wage rates, or none, as women and illegal immigrants could tell you. So could the kids who work for fast-food chains.) Through my discussion of *Eragon*, I will focus on one space where many children have tried to break this rather oppressive mold: authorship. There are several published child authors, most of whom write children's fiction. I am one of these. There are hundreds or maybe thousands of other children who write and finish books. There are also many children who write and don't finish books. Yet there always seems to be a semi-negative reaction if you tell any adult about your

writing. A taken-aback response. (Here comes a whinge about my own experiences.) Some adults begin rabbiting on in an embarrassed way about how clever I must be and how great it is. I am not sure what they expect me to say my book is about, but when I say it is a retelling of Greek myth that brings back into it the original stories' grittiness, they put on very shocked faces. Alternatively, they go into aggression mode, asking me how much of it I wrote and how much my mother did, asking me why it is under a pseudonym, etc. Yet the recurrent theme of the reactions seems to be surprise that someone my age can have written and published three books, have finished the fourth and be revising it, and have begun the fifth. Surprise, or shock?

This adult surprise and even alarm are the themes of this essay. I want to study the reactions toward child authors of children's fiction from both adults and children, taking as my example *Eragon* and *Eldest*. My interest in Paolini's achievement is that of a reader, a child reader, but also that of a fellow writer, a fellow *child* writer. We will see later why it's important that I am not only a reader, but a *child* reader, and not only an author, but a fellow *child* author.

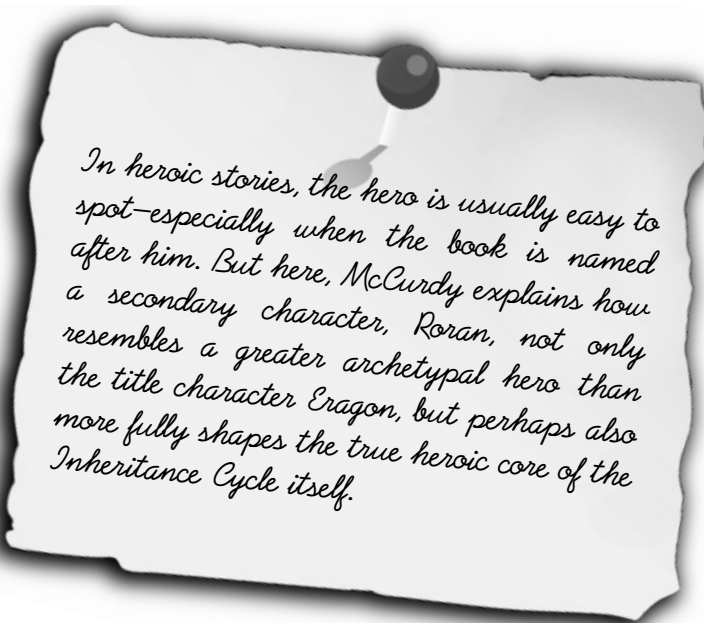
***Eragon* and Its Critics**

Eragon has been praised, but has also attracted some very intense criticism. Why did the book divide opinion so strongly? To try to understand people's dislike (or, indeed, their like) of *Eragon* I took a look at some reviews on Amazon.com. Most people's reviews are either one star or five. There appears to be

no median. There are tons of good reviews, several bad reviews, but very few in between: nearly twenty five- and four-star reviews, and seven one- and two-star reviews, but only one three-star one. But what is more worrying is the content of the reviews. Almost all the negative ones either say it is bad because it is derivative, bad because of its style (only one, and much of it was misspelled), or bad because it is in the style a teenager would write in. One of the others was attempting to get you to burn the book (!). And the positive ones are almost all incorrectly spelled and grammatically wrong. I can understand a few reasonable typos, but they can't ALL have happened to misspell several words. Does that mean they are not very experienced reviewers—i.e., children? And the content of the positive reviews is the sort of thing the other reviews are criticizing: a lack of depth and critical commentary, and an uneasy use of playground slang, with clichés and descriptions of the book as “cool” abounding. One five-star review just states the fact there will be four books. Most of them simply stress how great the story is, and nothing else at all. I know this isn't a proper study, that Amazon.com reviewers are a self-selecting sample who don't represent anything but themselves. But in the global village of Amazon.com, I still feel worried at this lack of in-betweeners, rational people who are trying to see the book's good points and bad ones too. This lack of a median is *not* actually typical of Amazon.com reviews. Most frequently reviewed books attract four- and three-star reviews. Not this one. I can see that there are two different types of people reading the book, yelling at each other with fervor rather than engaging in rational debate. Why?

Roran: The Reluctant Hero

J. FitzGerald McCurdy



In heroic stories, the hero is usually easy to spot—especially when the book is named after him. But here, McCurdy explains how a secondary character, Roran, not only resembles a greater archetypal hero than the title character Eragon, but perhaps also more fully shapes the true heroic core of the Inheritance Cycle itself.

Before I began writing this article, I was curious about what critics were saying about *Eldest*, so I searched the Internet to get a sense of the critical consensus. Among the thousands of results, the majority were fan driven, sharing a common “this is the best book ever written” theme. Many, particularly those posted by publishers and booksellers, seemed obviously generated to sell books. A few were written by serious reviewers; others

were something else entirely, and ranged in quality from goofy to obscene. All focused solely on the obvious elements of plot and characters and either approved of or poked holes in their development. None qualified as literary criticism.

Breaking with the rigid traditional standards, the eighteenth-century German critic Johann Gottfried Herder conceived of criticism (according to René Wellek in volume II of *Dictionary of the History of Idea*) as “a process of empathy, of identification, of something intuitive and even subrational.” He held that “in order to understand and interpret a piece of literature [one must] put oneself in the spirit of the piece itself.”

Herder’s view revolutionized the art of literary criticism and was the basis for productive or constructive criticism as opposed to the destructive criticism of that era, which simply applied a measure or standard of comparison—a yardstick for perfection. For example, if destructive criticism were applied today and if J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* was the standard against which all fantasy was measured, *Eldest* probably would have failed . . . along with almost every other modern fantasy book out there. As a result, there would be a lot fewer books published, including books that deserve attention but do not quite measure up.

Because my essay attempts to show that Roran is the unwitting hero of *Eldest*, I did as Herder suggested and put myself “in the spirit of the piece.” Then I approached the story with several questions in mind: What did Paolini set out to do? Why did he give Roran a major role? Was his plan sound and practical, and did he succeed in carrying it out? What effect do Roran’s segments have on Eragon?

To understand Roran's emergence as hero, it is necessary to understand the author's intent with respect to Inheritance in general and to Eragon in particular. Paolini's own words in an essay written for Random House provide a partial answer: "All I really wanted to do was share the epics floating around in my head with other people—writing was something I just had to master in order to make those sagas reality. . . . When I graduated from high school, I wanted to write a pure, dyed-in-the-wool hero story. So I immediately plotted out a trilogy based on my ideals of the archetypal maturation plot."

Eragon and its subsequent success are ample proof of Paolini's ability to plot and write a pure, well-paced hero story. This is important because he succeeded so well in book one that there was no need for Paolini to insinuate Roran into the story beyond teasing us with his presence—subtle foreshadowing that perhaps we weren't yet done with Roran. As readers we can smell a hero even before we reach the part where fifteen-year-old Eragon grasps the mysterious blue stone. Despite the author's inexperience, which shows in the lack of emotional depth in his characters and his often bumpy writing (after all, he was still a teenager), Paolini created a hero in the true mythic sense. While far from over, Eragon's journey is modeled after the universal pattern of the mythological hero journey Joseph Campbell called the *monomyth*. In Campbell's words in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men."

Seeking revenge for the death of his uncle, Eragon ventures forth in the company of wise old Brom and Saphira, the dragon hatchling, leaving behind everything and everyone he has ever known. Along the way, he bonds with his dragon, spars with Brom until his body is black and blue, uses his magic to zap bad things, rescues an elf maid, slays the shade Durza, experiences pain, suffering, and loss, and is on the brink of embarking on the deeper, darker journey within himself.

About subsequent books in *Inheritance* Paolini had this to say in an interview with Kit Spring in *The Observer*: “I want to show what I can do. And I think even the first draft of . . . *Eldest* . . . is better than the last draft of *Eragon*.” He elaborated further to Dave Welch in a three-way interview with Philip Pullman and Tamora Pierce on www.powells.com: “My second and third book, as I see it, are opportunities to expand upon the original archetypes and try to bring a depth to the world that I haven’t seen done or in ways that I want to explore personally. . . . I chose to have Eragon mature and learn throughout the course of my story because, for one thing, it’s one of the archetypal fantasy elements.”

It’s a good plan. And yes, maturation is an archetypal element of fantasy. The challenge, though, is to show the hero growing older and becoming wiser without making him aware he is doing so. In *Eldest*, instead of maturing and gaining wisdom as a result of his adventures on the journey, Eragon voluntarily veers far off course; he consciously grows in maturity and wisdom among the elves. It’s a bit like having a character confront adversity and realize immediately its cumulative effect by exclaiming, “Cool! I just gained self-confidence!” What’s missing is the sense of the hero’s wonder when, by his actions in some future trial, he realizes that

he's been changed by something he can't quite put his finger on. Separating the hero's maturation from the journey is like reading a song without the music.

It didn't work when Luke Skywalker went off to train with Yoda in *Star Wars*, and it doesn't work in *Eldest*. For one thing, the process is far too long for what Eragon gets out of it, as we learn in the battle scenes at the end of the book; it fills 450 of the book's 668 pages in my edition. For another, it upsets the rhythm and balance of the story and dilutes and weakens the entire journey, diminishing Eragon's role. As a result, *Eldest* is less bold and original than *Eragon*, whose hero and dragon delighted us as they delighted in each other. There was an impressive simplicity in the way Paolini dealt with the notion of a teenage boy finding himself with a swiftly growing female dragon on his hands.

Enter Roran.

At first reading, it appears that the Roran segments were added to *Eldest* after the book was written, perhaps at the urging of an editor in order to sate readers' appetites for action and to have Roran conveniently on hand at the end of the book, ready to set out with Eragon to save Katrina in book three. But in the interview on Powell's, posted before *Eldest* was published, Paolini explained his plan: "In Book Two, I switch viewpoints to Eragon's cousin, Roran. For a large part of the book, I'm flipping back and forth. That gave me the ability to move to a more mature character and explore some stuff I really can't deal with with Eragon at this point."

Whatever his reason for inserting Roran into the story as a major character, Paolini could not have known that he was creating a hero whose amazing accomplishments would com-

pletely overshadow Eragon. If he *had* known, I think he would have left Roran back in Carvahall. There are no rules of fantasy that limit the number of heroes an author can include in a story. If there were, Steven Erikson's magnificent *Malazan Book of the Fallen*, with its dozens of heroes, would be in serious trouble. But Erikson's heroes don't diminish one another, they complement each other, whereas in *Eldest*, each flip from Roran's action sequences to Eragon's passive study feels like a stumble.

While Roran is slogging through ankle-deep mud and tripping over corpses, fighting alongside the villagers against Empire soldiers and non-human Ra'zac, and while they are all weeping over their dead, crushed by the sight of ten-year-old Elmund among the casualties, the story flips to Eragon. We find ourselves adrift, literally, on a raft floating down the Az Ragni carrying Eragon, Orik, and Arya in the direction of Ellesméra, only to discover our erstwhile hero struggling to memorize the names of his seven dwarf companions as kingfishers and jackdaws flit above the water and the occasional bullfrog croaks from the ferns growing wild along the riverbank.

While Roran's days and nights are filled with fear and dread, for Eragon time passes in a "hazy dream of warm afternoons" and suppers around a campfire under a blanket of magic Arya casts to keep the mosquitoes away. While the Ra'zac are snatching Katrina from Roran's arms and Roran is struggling to save his beloved and himself, suffering a snapped wrist and a debilitating shoulder wound for his efforts, Eragon continues his uneventful journey to the land of the elves, riding an elven horse that won't even let him fall off.

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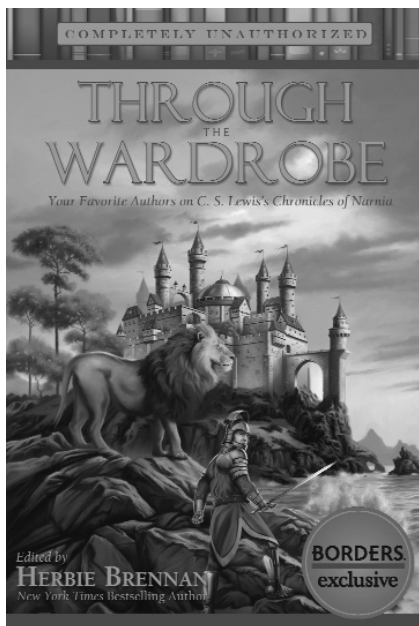
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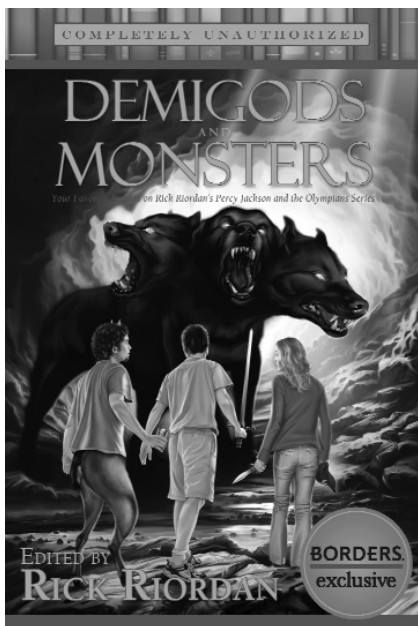
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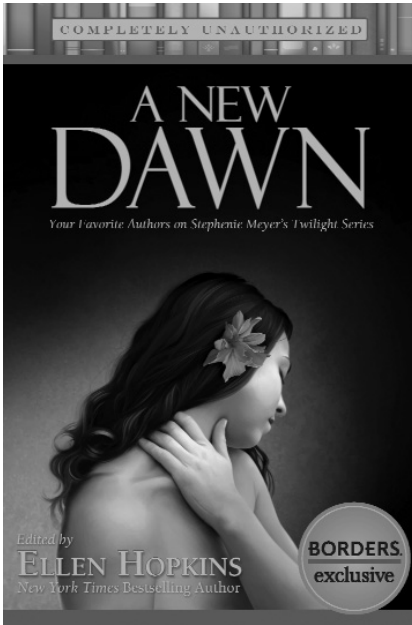
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