



Christopher Paolini: Growing up with dragons

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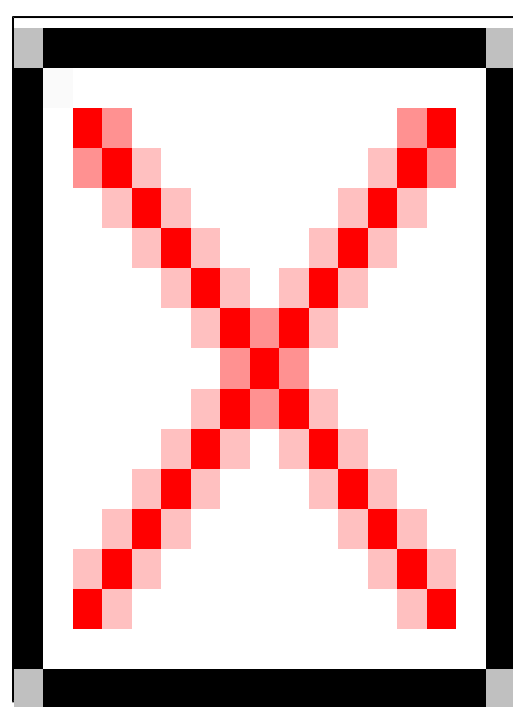
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Melissa Hyder caught up with Christopher Paolini for **Books for Keeps** at the beginning of a hectic four-day UK visit.



Christopher Paolini began writing **Eragon**, the first book in the epic fantasy *Inheritance* cycle, when he was just fifteen. It was originally self-published by Christopher's family, and now, two more books and sales of over 25 million copies later, the fourth and final book *Inheritance* is finally out. Melissa Hyder caught up with Christopher for **Books for Keeps** at the beginning of a hectic four-day UK visit, to discuss bringing an end to the series that he's been working on for over a decade, and the inevitable question 'What next?'

'It's really a shift of an epoch for me,' says Christopher. 'It's a huge personal and professional change and it's both very exciting and a little bit scary at the same time. 'I got to the last scene and I was literally shaking. My sister comes in with the video camera [you can find the video of this on Youtube] as I was putting in the last few lines and I was so overwhelmed that I actually found myself actually unable to write the line that I wanted. So I stopped and I went back and did all the rest of the editing for the rest of the book and then I came back to the last scene a couple of weeks later. I was a bit calmer, I could look at it, took a deep breath, and I changed one word. And then I could take a deep breath and release that tension and say ok, now I can let it go. That said, I'm very, very happy to have finished the series and very much looking forward to readers seeing how the story is going to resolve.'

The books have a worldwide army of fans, all theorising wildly across cyberspace about what might happen in this highly anticipated final book. Christopher's smile widens when I mention this. 'I'm doing my best to stay two jumps

ahead of them. Or at least a jump and a half. That's the challenge. Readers have certain expectations of how they think the story will resolve ? or how they think it should resolve ? and so my responsibility and the challenge as the author is to fulfill those expectations in an unexpected way. So that people are going to be left feeling, *Oh yes, that's the way it should have ended, but I still didn't see it coming.* I'm pleased to say I think there are quite a number of surprises in the fourth book.?

With many adults addicted to the series too, I wondered if he was still writing for his fifteen-year-old self or if his intended readership had shifted over the course of the books. ?I try to tell a good story. And I hope that if I tell a good story that my fifteen-year-old me would enjoy reading it. The books have got progressively more mature and that's a natural progression for series like this, especially when the characters themselves are growing up. I'm aware of what I would have liked at that age and there's lots of that in the story, but I also think there is more, that if you're an older reader you'll find a lot to still enjoy and appreciate in the story. We've gone beyond one generation of readers at this point and to me that's truly amazing. I'm getting readers coming up now who have actually grown up with the books, and they went from kids to adults in that time.?

There must be something particular about the appeal of fantasy to such a wide range of readers though. Is there something it can bring that no other genre of book can? ?I know when I was in my teens reading these sorts of stories myself was very helpful in growing up because they talk about the experience of growing up and help show young people how to find their way in the world when often that's very confusing. Yes it's in a fantasy world and there are monsters and swordfights, but, at the same time, the themes are universal. The coming of age story is so popular just because it's something everyone goes through. It leaves a huge mental mark on you and it's just a really rich, fertile ground to write about and obviously people enjoy reading about it.

?One of the accusations often levelled at fantasy is that it's escapism and there's an element of that. The appeal is that fantasy allows us to externalise a lot of the things that are going on internally, and really put that front and centre in a way that you can't if it's a realistic novel. You have this term 'space opera' in science fiction and I think in a lot of ways fantasy's like opera too. No one ever accused opera of being subtle! But it can be extremely moving and touching. And then of course the genre of fantasy is extremely broad ? there are plenty of authors who do very subtle things as well. My type of fantasy tends to be a little more big and loud.?

He's not kidding. Epic battles, oppression, grand themes, multiple storylines, and, oh yes, dragons. But there is a key difference between his books and a lot of the more grisly fiction on the children's bookshelves at the moment. ?One of the things that I'm very aware of is the use of violence in my books, and because so many fantasy books have lots of battles, especially when you have characters who have abilities beyond the normal which allow them to just kill people left and right, it can be very easy to just gloss over all those deaths. For my series, I really thought it was important to pay attention to the effect violence would have on the characters and how they deal with it. It's difficult because sometimes you do just want to write a straight-up adventure piece and at the same time you're thinking, 'Yeah, well, if I were actually in that situation it would be pretty horrible' and I can't quite bring myself to whitewash it.?

Paolini goes into depth not only in his themes, but in the very creation of the world of Alagaesia where the story takes place, drawing its roots from Old English and Norse sagas, to the traditions of classic fantasy tales. It's such a richly detailed world that I have to ask if he has any plans to return to it in the future. ?It's certainly possible. I've laid the groundwork in **Brisings** and **Inheritance** for future books if I wish to return to the land. And I'm sure I will. I love the world, I love the characters and I love fantasy, obviously. But it probably won't be the first thing I do after this series.?

So? what is next? ?I've plotted out about twenty or thirty separate books. It's just a question of picking the next one and diving into that. Most of my ideas are not big series at this point, they'd be more standalone novels.?

While those were the only details forthcoming, it already sounds very intriguing ? and very different to setting out to write such an epic fantasy. I asked if that was something he planned before putting pen to paper, or if the world grew and developed as he explored it.

?Most of the story points I set in place back in 1998 when I started writing the series. There are certainly elements that have changed ? like the fates of several of the main characters. I realised that they had changed over the course of the books and they were no longer the people I had originally thought they were . . . they behaved differently. And the way I do it is pretty simple. I start with a basic premise and say, ?Ok, how did we arrive at the situation we're at, and what happens next?? And you just keep asking what, how, why and you keep asking those questions and build the world off that basis.?

Could that be what drives him to write? To answer those questions? ?I think that's really where the challenge and enjoyment of writing come from ? that magic of how you're trying to capture the ineffable sometimes. Everyone writes for different reasons. For some people it's delight in playing with language, for others it's the story primarily, or it's the characters or the world. In my case, it tends to be a seminal moment in the story that I'll get inside my head and think that *that* is what the story is about, so everything else in the series or in the book is simply there to support usually one scene. And in the case of the fourth book it was the final scene. The very last scene in the book is really why I started the series.?

I for one can't wait to find out what the scene is that's inspired four books, an intricate fantasy world, a dedicated fan base and a decade's dedication.

Christopher Paolini's **Inheritance** (?The Inheritance Cycle?, 978 0 3856 1649 2) is published by Doubleday at £18.99 hbk.

Melissa Hyder has worked in children's publishing for seven years and loves fantasy and sci-fi, although will happily read anything she can get hold of.

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