

Magic and Dragons And Writing... Oh, My!



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Inside the World of Christopher Paolini

By Bryon Cahill

Christopher Paolini was never an average teenager. While his peers were hanging out at the mall on weekends, Paolini, now 23, spent his young-adult years on the banks of the Yellowstone River in Montana, dreaming up an imaginary land filled with heroes and dragons.

Paolini started writing his first novel, *Eragon*, when he was only 15. *Eragon* is the first part of the *Inheritance Trilogy*, an epic fantasy set in a war-ridden world called Alagaësia (www.alagaesia.com). It follows the adventures of a young boy and his dragon friend.

When Paolini finished writing *Eragon* in 2002, his parents helped him self-publish the book. Sales were brisk, and soon the teen **prodigy** began touring schools across the country to talk about his work. Along the way, his book got the attention of agents at New York publishing giant Alfred A. Knopf.

Within months, Knopf had signed Paolini to a six-figure, three-book contract and was making plans to publish *Eragon*. In August 2003, *Eragon* hit bookstores in a big way, catching the attention of young readers everywhere and climbing the best-seller lists.

Three years later, Paolini's star remains on the rise. His second book, *Eldest*, was published in 2005; the final part of his trilogy is in the works; and the screen version of *Eragon* was released last month. In a recent interview with *Writing*, the successful young author discussed fantasy, reality, and the world of homeschooling.



Writing: You were homeschooled as a child. How, if at all, did that experience influence your early writing?

Paolini: Being homeschooled was a wonderful experience. Whenever I became interested in a subject, my parents allowed me to investigate it. The other advantage was that it allowed me to work at my own pace and graduate early. Without the frantic schedule kept by many teens, I had more free time to think, to day-dream, and to create the world of Alagaësia.

Writing: What is it about the fantasy genre that you love so much?

Paolini: I love writing fantasy because I love reading fantasy. Through fantasy, you can experience things that would be otherwise impossible. Fantasy is an ancient genre; its roots lie in myths and legends. Even classics such as the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* could be termed fantasy. Fantasy allows you to tap into people's **primal** hopes, fears, and ambitions, to weave grand epics out of our collective dreams.

Writing: What role did stories play in your youth? Did you read a lot?

Paolini: A huge role! Growing up, I was always reading or playing games outside with my sister and making up stories to go with the games—grand epics about spaceships and rockets and monsters and adventure and all the other fun stuff I was reading about. I have fond memories of my mom and dad reading stacks of children's books to us when we were younger. Later, they read us Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Longfellow, and many others.

Writing: How did you get involved in writing? What is your first writing memory?

Paolini: My first exposure to writing was when my mom assigned writing projects to my sister and me. I always thought that crafting a story that I would enjoy reading myself would be a challenging, interesting, and fun thing to do. I just had no idea it would turn out the way it did.

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My Writing, My Life

Exclusive: Christopher Paolini shares his literary likes and inspirations with you.

My favorite opening line of a book is ... "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."—*The Gunslinger: The Dark Tower*, Stephen King

My favorite time to write is ... anytime I can get to write. I write pretty much nonstop throughout the day.

What inspires me most is ... music and landscape. Where I live inspires me most. I live in a place called Paradise Valley, Mont. The scenery all around me is the geological equivalent of classical music.



When I am not writing, you can often find me ... drawing, whittling, metal-working, forming chain mail, hiking, exercising ... doing anything to help me get my mind off writing for a while. It is important to do other things.

Being a writer means ... sitting in your room for very long stretches of time, not talking to anyone else, and thinking about people and lands that don't exist and then trying to make them convincing to other people.

Some of my favorite books are ... *Dune*, by Frank Herbert; *Ender's Game*, by Orson Scott Card; *Magician*, by Raymond E. Feist; *The Wizard of Earthsea* trilogy, by Ursula K. Le Guin; *His Dark Materials* trilogy, by Philip Pullman; and Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*.

My advice for young writers is ... read widely, and study how other authors construct plots and wield the language. Learn everything you can about English, or whatever language you happen to be using; vocabulary and grammar are the tools of the trade, and all writers should be familiar with them. Also, good editing is an invaluable asset to a writer. If you're writing fantasy or any other long, involved story, plot it out before you begin writing. And never give up. It's easy to become discouraged, but you have to persist if you want to achieve your goals.

Special thanks to seventh grader Gloria Manyee Lin, from Cupertino, Calif., for submitting questions to Christopher Paolini.

Writing: You once said that “clear writing is a direct result of clear thinking. Without one you cannot have the other.” How can a writer obtain clear thinking?

Paolini: I plot out my books beforehand. That way, when I sit before a blank page, I know what I’m supposed to describe and what should happen afterward. Even when I’m not writing, I think about the next paragraph, the next scene, and how they need to be structured, so when I return to my desk, my thoughts and writing are well organized and clearly thought out.

Writing: I’ve read that you like to write while listening to classical music, that it “fires your imagination.” How does music inspire you?

Paolini: If I listen to a piece of music that expresses the same range of emotions I’m trying to convey in a scene, then the words fly onto the page. The right music works as a **catalyst**, so I take great care when picking the day’s selections. Music helps me decipher and condense the multitude of sights, sounds, smells, and passions whirling around in my head. Of all the genres I’ve listened to, classical music seems the richest—it speaks to the deepest emotions of humanity: love, death, beauty, sorrow, and what it means to be a person on this fair Earth.



Books are cool! They allow you to get inside the characters’ heads ... to view the world through another set of eyes.

Writing: You once said, “It’s a bit frightening to be at the mercy of an imaginary creature within your own head.” What did you mean by that?

Paolini: There are moments when my characters seem to act of their own free will, and I feel as if I’m merely recording their deeds, not inventing them. When it happens, the writing process produces a sense of danger and excitement quite unlike anything else. The best thing I can do then is relax, forget my preconceived notions, and enjoy the ride.

Writing: You began writing *Eragon* when you were 15. Some people might say you’re a child prodigy. What is your answer to that?

Paolini: I’m fortunate enough to have parents who have supported me with encouragement, advice, and, when it was needed, financial and technical assistance. Without them, I wouldn’t have had the confidence to finish *Eragon*, nor the knowledge to self-publish it. One of the most rewarding aspects of getting my books published has been hearing from teens and preteens who are writing novels of their own. It’s great to see that sort of dedication and love of literature among young people, and I feel honored when they tell me that my work has inspired them to pursue their dreams. I firmly believe that anyone with the desire to write couldn’t help but turn out a book.

Writing: Who are your heroes?

Paolini: I admire people who have the perseverance to finish a book; it’s a pretty heroic endeavor. But my biggest heroes are my parents, who’ve done so much for my sister and me.

Writing: Where or how do you get your ideas?

Paolini: Ideas often come to me when I’m walking, listening to classical music, watching a movie, or reading a book. They usually happen as a result of taking two seemingly disparate objects or concepts and combining them in a way that I have not encountered before.

Writing: What do you do when you get writer’s block?

Paolini: If I get writer’s block, I usually take a walk or exercise. I also talk with my family, editor, and agent if something in the book troubles me. Sometimes they’ll have an idea that solves the problem. More often, simply verbalizing the problem will reveal a solution.

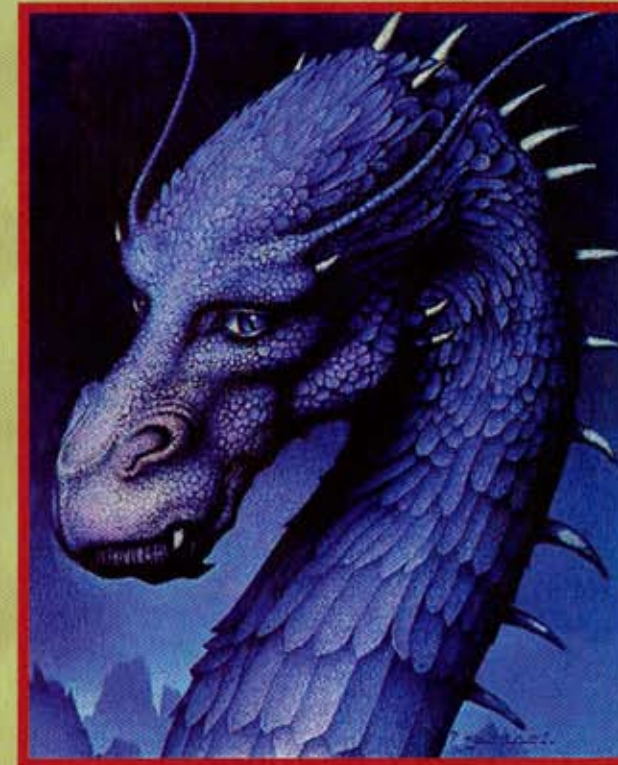
Writing: Do you have any story ideas you plan to write when you have completed the *Inheritance Trilogy*?

Paolini: Yes, everything from science fiction to horror to thriller to mystery to romance. I look forward to trying my hand at many different kinds of literature once I finish this trilogy, although I will always remain devoted to fantasy, as it’s my first and primary love.

Excerpt From *Eragon*
By Christopher Paolini

Awakening

The dragon was no longer than his forearm, yet it was dignified and noble. Its scales were deep sapphire blue, the same color as the stone. But not a stone, he realized, an egg. The dragon fanned its wings; they were what had made it appear so contorted. The wings were several times longer than its body and ribbed with thin fingers of bone that extended from the wing’s front edge, forming a line of widely spaced talons. The dragon’s head was roughly triangular. Two **diminutive** white fangs curved down out of its upper jaw. They looked very sharp. Its claws were also white, like polished ivory, and slightly serrated on the inside curve. A line of small spikes ran down the creature’s spine from



the base of its head to the tip of its tail. A hollow where its neck and shoulders joined created a larger-than-normal gap between the spikes.

Eragon shifted slightly, and the dragon’s head snapped around. Hard, ice-blue eyes fixed on him. He kept very still. It might be a formidable enemy if it decided to attack.

The dragon lost interest in Eragon and awkwardly explored the room, squealing as it bumped into a wall or furniture. With a flutter of wings, it leapt onto the bed and crawled to his pillow, squeaking. Its mouth was open pitifully, like a young bird’s, displaying rows of pointed teeth. Eragon sat cautiously on the end of the bed. The dragon smelled his hand, nibbled his sleeve. He pulled his arm back.

A smile tugged at Eragon’s lips as he looked at the small creature. Tentatively, he reached out with his right hand and touched its flank. A blast of icy energy surged into his hand and raced up his arm, burning in his veins like liquid fire. He fell back with a wild cry. An iron clang filled his ears, and he heard a soundless scream of rage. Every part of his body seared with pain. He struggled to move, but was unable to.

After what seemed like hours, warmth seeped back into his limbs, leaving them tingling. Shivering uncontrollably, he pushed himself upright. His hand was numb, his fingers paralyzed. Alarmed, he watched as the middle of his palm shimmered and formed a diffused white oval. The skin itched and burned like a spider bite. His heart pounded frantically.

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