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### Abstract

Interview with Donaldson in which he discusses background and technique of the Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, as well as aspects of fantasy in general.

### Additional Keywords

Donaldson, Stephen R.—Interviews; Donaldson, Stephen R. The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant—Sources; Donaldson, Stephen R. The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant—Technique; Fantasy literature

# A Conversation with Stephen R. Donaldson

## Edited by Calvin Rich and Earl Ingersol

Stephen R. Donaldson granted this interview in March 1983, when he was a guest of the Writers Forum at the State University of New York College at Brockport. At the time of the interview, Donaldson had completed all six books in the Thomas Covenant Chronicles: Lord Foul's Bane, The Illearth War, The Power that Preserves, The Wounded Land, The One Tree, and White Gold Wielder. He had also published, under the name of Reed Stephens, a detective story, The Man Who Killed His Brother. Since then his collection of short stories, Daughter of Regals and Other Tales, and a second detective novel, The Man Who Risked His Partner, have appeared.

Mr. Donaldson spoke with Calvin Rich and Frederick Burelbach, who regularly teach courses in fantasy and science fiction at the State University of New York College at Brockport.

We think there are good reasons to make public a transcript of this interview. First, it demonstrates Donaldson's remarkable sense of and respect for the craft of writing. Second, it gives readers help in appreciating and understanding the Covenant series. Third, Donaldson's readers would enjoy reading something about him while they wait for his next publication.

**Rich:** I would like to begin with a question that gets at the conception of the Chronicles. In an article in People magazine, it was reported that while you were sitting in church, in one great moment you conceived the Chronicles. It even suggested that you may have conceived the third Chronicles which hasn't been written yet. Could you tell us to what extent this is true?

**Donaldson:** Do you mean, does People magazine perform yellow journalism, or does it report the facts? Well, like everything else in life, it's part true and part not true.

There were really two ideas that went into the creation of the Covenant series. The first was a crucial one in many ways, but it was a static idea. Two or three years before I started working on The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, I got the idea of writing a fantasy about a man from the real world who has a fantasy experience and rejects the reality of that experience. Now, the crucial point there was that this rejection of reality would be a source of power which would enable this man to resist evil. The evil character in this fantasy would not have the strength to destroy my protagonist because my protagonist would deny the reality of that evil. I thought this was an absolutely wonderful idea, and I was dying to do something with it, but unfortunately there was no story attached to it. This idea sat in my head for two and a half or three years, and I could not for the life of me think of a story. I couldn't figure out what the characters were like, what the situation was like, what the world was like--anything.

Then, on this particular Sunday that I frequently refer to, I happened to be in a small town in Illinois--Carlinville, where Blackburn College is. My sister Barbie was graduating from college. My parents were in the United States for one of their infrequent visits. My father was a medical missionary in India and periodically was in the United States

for a home assignment; so he happened to be able to attend Barbie's graduation also. Well, he was a Presbyterian missionary, and there was a tiny little Presbyterian church in Carlinville, so naturally they asked him to come and speak about his work. On that particular Sunday, my Dad was in the pulpit talking about his work in India. Now, he was not a preacher; he was a doctor. When he stood in pulpits, all he did was talk about things that he did and things that he cared about. One of the subjects that he cared about a lot was the psychological and social burden of having leprosy. As a doctor in India, an orthopedic surgeon, he worked extensively with lepers, and their dilemma moved him--deeply.

As it happened, I'd heard all this material before--I'd heard my father speak often--and I knew all of his little pep talks about leprosy. But it happened as I was sitting there in this little congregation of about fifteen people--of whom half were Donaldsons attending my sister's graduation--I began to think that if you considered a character who would reject fantasy in favor of reality, it should be a character whose fantasies are infinitely preferable to reality. If you take a man who has a terrific real life and lousy, miserable fantasies, then for him to reject the fantasies is not a moral statement--it's just self-interest; it doesn't prove anything about the nature of fantasy or reality. On the other hand, if you take someone who has a miserable real life and an absolutely wonderful fantasy, and he still says that reality is morally predominant, that reality can be distinguished from fantasy, that it matters more, that you reject fantasy even when it's better than reality--that may seem slightly loony, but it's a moral statement of one kind or another. It means something about the nature of reality and about the nature of human integrity. And what person's real life could possibly be more miserable--says I to myself listening to my father speak--than a leper's?

Now, that was an electrifying conjunction of ideas for me; at that moment things began to explode in my head. It wasn't as if, sitting there in the pew, I suddenly knew all the details of a two-million-word epic fantasy, but the tree was sprouting at an astonishing rate. I spent the next three months sitting at home simply taking notes on the implications of what was sprouting like crazy in my head, and within three months I was ready to begin writing Lord Foul's Bane. If you look at that seed, you can see it's the genesis of everything: the fantasy world that I've created is simply a reverse image of someone who has leprosy. If you are a leper you typically lose the nerves of touch so that your fingers become numb, and you can't feel what's there. I wrote about a fantasy world in which you can not only feel sensations of touch, but you can feel sensations of health and honesty and integrity and beauty. On every level, as soon as I knew that my protagonist, my "unbeliever," was going to be a leper, then I knew what I was dealing with, and it was just a question--from an imaginative point of view--of filling in the blanks before I was ready to start writing.

**Burelbach:** I've wondered about that epithet "unbeliever": what is he unbelieving in?

**Donaldson:** In a literal sense, he is unbelieving in the reality of what happens to him in this fantasy world; he takes, in a grandiose way, the position that it is a dream or a delusion--something false or less important than reality. I liked the term, because it allowed me to suggest various other possibilities; for instance, another word for unbeliever is *infidel*, and then that gets into religious questions and other things that I like to deal with by suggestion, rather than by explicit statement. The term "unbeliever" raises Biblical questions; it ties into the idea of Thomas, the doubter or unbeliever, and covenant--I could get all tied up in the various things I was thinking about at the time. You will notice that when I get to the second *Chronicles*, I drop the term, "the unbeliever," from the title. That's because the question of unbelief, of denying the reality or the importance of the fantasy experience, is a vanishing theme in these stories. As Covenant finds an answer that satisfies him, it ceases to be a driving force in his motivational structure and in the thematic structure of the books. And so, the question of unbelief is not one that continues to be terribly important throughout the series, but it is terribly important in the first trilogy: Covenant has to resolve the question of what he does and does not believe in, and he is originally in the position where he believes in the chair, and he does not believe in the monster lurking in the corner behind it. That seems simple enough. Eventually he begins to realize that the potential represented by the possibility that you can at least think there's a monster lurking in the corner behind you is a vital human characteristic, and one that must be dealt with.

**Burelbach:** Am I hearing you suggest a correlation between believing in the monster lurking in the corner in that fantasy world and believing in a deity?

**Donaldson:** I wouldn't want to go too far, off the cuff as it were, but it does seem to me that one of the vital parts of being human is not only our ability to conceive of life in terms that we cannot prove but also almost a necessity of human personality that we think of life and of the meaning of life in terms which are not susceptible to verification. From the beginning of time, we have postulated gods of various kinds to account for that dimension of our experience which seems to transcend the tables and chairs of ordinary reality. There has to be a reason why we do that, and it is a very deeply human kind of thing that we do it. That part of us is, I think, one part of the things that good fantasy deals with almost explicitly in a thematic way. On the other hand, I would hate to come right out and assert that it means A, B, or C; it's there, and fantasy wrestles with that aspect of human perception.

**Rich:** The creation that you handle there is one of the most interesting parts of the book. You start out with myths and suggestions that may or may not be true: the reader doesn't have to accept them, the characters don't have to accept them, but we keep getting little indications that part of these myths is true. One of my real problems is that although we seemingly meet a Creator at the end of *The Power that Preserves*, when I ran into the Worm at World's End in *The One Tree*, I was totally confused. How does the Worm fit in with this Creator who cares so much?

**Donaldson:** What we are dealing with here are two

completely different conceptions of how creation occurs, but they are not mutually exclusive. Being the child of missionary parents, and therefore from a very religious background, one of the things I had to learn early was a certain kind of theological legerdemain. The first application of that legerdemain a child learns is the discovery that it's not impossible to believe in evolution and in the Genesis account of Creation simultaneously. God created the world in seven days, but obviously all the scientific evidence indicates that the world was created over millions and millions of years, through evolution. With the proper sleight of hand, there is nothing mutually contradictory about these kinds of ideas. For one thing it says explicitly in the Bible that one day is as a thousand years to God, so quickly you reinterpret your sense of time, and then you just have to say there is no particular reason why God could not have used evolution to create the world. Now, that's just an example of the type of thinking that I'm personally indulging in in this situation.

There is no exclusive reason to say that the Creator you were thinking of could not have used the Worm of the World's End as a vehicle for creating the world. Maybe that was the tool or the mechanism by which our world came to be created. In other words, I'm simply saying one idea does not exclude the other. Beyond that, I don't want to be in a hurry to pin this sort of thing down; what I'm after is the suggestiveness of both possibilities, and it seems to me that it's historically and psychologically accurate that different peoples have different ways of accounting for how they came into being. What I'm trying to do in writing this is to communicate to you something about those people who tell that story. It's more revealing as a description of character than it is as a description of the state of the universe. The Elohim tell one kind of story; the Lords of the Land tell another, and you learn a lot about who they are by the kind of story they tell. And then there is this buried, self-conscious, worried part of me that is afraid that I've gotten myself into trouble by contradicting myself. [Laughter] I don't want to pursue that too far for fear I'll find out it's true.

**Rich:** What you bring up about using these things as part of the characterization--in many ways your book is filled with contemporary issues--caring for the environment, for example--but it does not become merely an issues book. Were you conscious of having to restrain your interest in issues so that they wouldn't become more important than the characters and hence kill the story?

**Donaldson:** I don't think that particular balancing act was one that was difficult for me; the reason is that I don't start by thinking about the issues at all. I start from the story and the characters, and then I try to discover, by thinking about them hard, what the characters might be interested in or involved in. Ecological issues come very naturally in a world which is a reverse image of leprosy, because if you are going to start being able to feel when a tree is healthy and hear when somebody is telling the truth and know whether flowers are in the right soil, if this is the natural stuff of perception, then you are naturally going to be sensitive to those kinds of questions, and you'll have a world in which questions of ecology become questions of religion or philosophy. That just seemed to me a simple matter of narrative logic, not

something I set out to preach, because I personally happen to have views of the ecology. And, since I didn't write to present my views, but to discover the views inherent in the material, it wasn't a big problem to keep it in perspective.

The perspective problems I had had to do with Covenant's personality from the beginning, because I started with him as a leper and then evolved him as a person. I gave him a compendium of all the emotional and psychological ills from which a leper might suffer. That stuff overwhelmed the character in the early drafts, particularly of Lord Foul's Bane, in a really destructive way. I had trouble writing such issues into perspective so that they made a character instead of a list of histrionics. The other issues people find in the books such as ecology or feminism evolved naturally from the material and were, therefore, things I didn't have to wrestle with to keep in perspective.

**Burelbach:** Getting into the relationship between you and the audience, one of the things I can't fail to notice is an incredible versatility of vocabulary, words like condign and percipience and exerudescence. What audience are you trying to reach?

**Donaldson:** Well, of course, I'm trying to write for myself. What motivates any writer is the desire to tell the stories that he wishes other people were writing but they're not. That's an oversimplification, but it suggests that you're trying to please yourself in a certain way, envisioning a reader very much like yourself. You get into trouble if you do it any other way; if you start to think of your reader as an unenlightened tenth-grader, it's going to be very difficult not to write down and to be condescending. That's ineffective communication. On the other hand, if you think of your reader as Vladimir Nabokov, or somebody who's a whole lot smarter than you are, then you end up straining your brain in artificial ways to seem more intelligent than you really are, and that doesn't work. Obviously you have to write toward a conception of yourself as the ideal reader. I don't trot out fancy vocabulary in an effort to show off. I do it for a couple reasons. One is that I just love words, and some of these fine old words like condign seem to have an aura of joy about them that makes them hard for me to resist; but the other thing is that they are precise for the use I put them to. There are certain things you can say with a word like surquedry that you cannot say with a word like arrogance, unless you add two or three words on to arrogance to make it as precise as surquedry. Well, all right, nobody knows what surquedry is but me and Sir Walter Scott. [Laughter] Maybe I'll get lucky; maybe somebody will learn and maybe find out there was a much more efficient way to say what I meant, than to pile four adjectives on to arrogance. From that point of view, I feel as though I'm a virtuous craftsman, and people should give me credit for my good intention.

**Rich:** I thought it had something to do with the craft, because you're dealing with extraordinary things which grow more and more extraordinary and more and more intense, and it seemed to me if you used a trimmed-down language like Hemingway's it simply wouldn't have fit the situation or the characters.

**Donaldson:** The way I think of it is that on a certain level it's an operatic mode of storytelling,

and there is a certain requirement for lushness and declamatory prose. It is a balancing act, and I won't for a minute claim that I always strike the balance perfectly. In rereading my own stuff, it seems there are passages where I got a little carried away, and things should have been toned down a bit. Nevertheless, it is emotionally appropriate to the kind of story that I'm trying to tell that there should be an element of piquancy or romance in the language as well as in what's being described. It goes with the territory that we're going to have from time to time a certain exploration of the English language as well as an exploration of what the language is talking about.

**Burelbach:** Despite the increased efficiency of those words, though, there are a lot of words in those six novels. I understand there are more words in the first trilogy than in Tolkien's trilogy The Lord of the Rings, and there's a second trilogy besides that. Do you see yourself as somehow in competition with Tolkien?

**Donaldson:** No, writing is not a competition, and no creative activity is a footrace in which one guy wins and everybody else comes in last. I become uncomfortable when people talk about comparisons to Tolkien, because our society seems to perceive an area like fantasy as one in which there is a competition, and only one guy gets to be the good fantasy writer. There's Tolkien, and then there's all the rest of us cheap imitators. Or, if I get lucky, then I become the big fantasy writer and Tolkien becomes the cheap imitator. That's just silly. There's room for everything in literature. There is no sense in which I am damaged by the excellence of Tolkien's work, or conversely that Tolkien is reduced by any particular virtues there may be in my work.

Competition becomes a problem for me in the sense that I often feel in competition with myself, particularly in writing a sequel, a second trilogy of Thomas Covenant. It was desperately important to me not to let anybody down: I didn't want anybody to come out of White Gold Wielder and say, "Well, that's nice but it's boring compared to the first trilogy." [Laughter] That would break my heart. From the first gestation stages of the second trilogy, I was conscious of a competition with my first trilogy. If I did a good job with the first, I wanted to do a great one with the second. That's not a bad thing; people need to strive in the ways that they can for whatever 'excellences they can imagine, and I don't think it's been bad for me to compete with myself. I do automatically protest that literature is a competition, however.

**Burelbach:** Well, the first trilogy was a tough act to follow, and I think you did beautifully, but doesn't that make the second a still tougher act?

**Donaldson:** Yes, that's one reason why I am not going to continue in this vein for some time. I don't think at present I know enough about myself or life or Thomas Covenant to compete with the second Chronicles, so I'm not going to. But I do know where the story is going.

**Rich:** In answering that question, you talked about literature as a continuity--things building together and not being in competition. Once I wrote you to ask what book would be the best antecedent for my course in fantasy and romance which included your



first trilogy. You wrote back, Idylls of the King, and I didn't quite understand why. When I asked you why the other night, you had just started on a good answer, and we had to stop. Could you talk a little about that?

**Donaldson:** It's a shame that "good answer" was lost; it will probably never be repeated again. I'm a big fan of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King; I find it an immensely powerful retelling of the Arthurian story. When I was in graduate school, it was a cliché that Idylls of the King is an epic on the subject of why it is no longer possible to write epics. In a sense, from a literary point of view, the epic in our history has been a declining art form which suffered near-total eclipse for 100 or 200 years.

It used to be that epic fantasy was what we had in literature: Beowulf is an epic fantasy, as is the Mahabharata, early Japanese literature, or Gilgamesh. They are epics in the sense that they are large, that they deal with dramatic and larger-than-life situations--heroes, dilemmas, needs, passions, and ideals--and most of them are fantasy in that the events are unrealistic or unreal or magical in some way. You cannot persuade me that the contemporaries of the Beowulf epic believed that their heroes could swim down to the bottom of lakes and stay there for a day or two without drowning and then come back up. People knew about drowning. Nevertheless, when they told the story, they had to give it that kind of wondrous or magical detail in order to say why the event had been so important or to convey the emotional importance of the original story. Then it grows until it becomes this immensely epic adventure. The same is true of The Iliad and The Odyssey and The Aeneid. Much of the material is what you would automatically, rationally, assume is not real, not realistic. Well, it wasn't invented by the poet because the poet was a stupid man and he thought those things were true. You have to provide that dimension of magic or wonder or size in order to convey the importance of what you're really talking about.

That spirit has sustained epics throughout literature for quite a while, but one thing that happened in Western civilization was our growing discovery of our limitations as humans. We became more and more suspicious of heroism and magic and things of a large scale and large size. We hung on to epics through people like Milton, but Milton was writing his epic to explicate a religious perception that had already stepped back from being an explication of physical reality; he was now explaining theological reality. A similar statement could be made about Spenser. After that we find that people didn't write epics at all. More and more we knew that there was no magic in the world, that things were not all that wonderful, that these large-scale heroes always had some tragic flaw and turned out to be corrupt.

By the time we get to Tennyson, the only thing we had was grief when people thought about the possibility of epics. Tennyson's story is one of the saddest things in the world, because he's saying, "Here is King Arthur, my epic figure," and then idyll by idyll he brings in little doses of Victorian reality--doses of duplicity, practical reality, the way human beings really behave. And the entire structure just crumbles into ruins. Arthurian passion and idealism--epic ideas and epic beliefs--cannot endure in the face of reality, and Tennyson knows that, and he writes very movingly about it.

Readers like myself are reduced to astonishing grief. After Tennyson we have nothing in epic fantasy until Tolkien.

Tolkien did a wonderful thing for our literature; he made epics possible again, and the way he did it was by completely divorcing them from the real world. There was no longer any use of the magic and the wonder and the power to explain aspects of reality, or even theology, that were important in the daily lives of his audience. By making those things separate, it's possible to talk about them again. You can talk about magic and heroism and passion and the love you feel for a beautiful world that's being threatened. That brought the possibility of epic fantasy back into our literature and opened the door for people like me to take someone like Thomas Covenant who exists in the real world and start injecting him into a fantasy experience, which then allows me to pull the themes and questions of fantasy back into the real world. What I'm hoping is going on in our literature is a reclaiming of a lost and really wonderful literary territory so that we will become again a people with a sense of wonder and respect, not in a childish way, for the possibilities of courage and heroism and largeness in our lives.

**Burelbach:** We look forward to the continuation of your epic fantasy, however long it takes you to do it.

Childlike, continued from page 22

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