

Author's Biography: My life as a writer

Because most of my writing is actually retelling legends, I am probably one of the few authors in the world who *doesn't* get asked, "Where do you get your ideas?" I've had plans lined up for future books since I started writing, although sometimes they've been changed in odd ways...

I started writing at the age of fifteen, when we were studying *Le Morte d'Arthur* in English class and my teacher asked me, rather despairingly, exactly *what* it was I saw in Mordred. Finding this difficult to articulate verbally, I responded by writing three hundred thirty-odd pages in order to show her how Camelot might look from the perspective of the one person who wasn't part of the overall ideology – was, in fact, proof of its faults.

That book never got published, but it did receive some nice rejection notes (because that was back when you could still send an unsolicited ms. to a publisher and not wait more than nine months to a year before getting a reply – could, in fact, get a reply), and I was on my way. My second was written for a contest, and was the sort of high school modernization of the Faust story, with drugs replacing black magic, that only a sixteen year-old could find Deeply Significant. My third book was a vaguely pseudo-Norse fantasy that, again, collected a lot of nice rejection notes, as did my fourth, a foray into science fiction. Sort of. Much to my relief, these manuscripts are probably all lost forever (except the first, which is registered in the Library of Congress, if anyone ever wants to find it).

After that, I went to Southern Methodist University, where I majored in German Area Studies and English, with a focus on creative writing. SMU had very strong creative writing teachers, who taught me a lot about what I was doing; but for three years or so, I contented myself with short stories (including *Mimir's Well*, my first real foray into the world of early Scandinavia. Partial foray, more accurately. The other parts are set in the now-defunct metaphysical bookstore where I worked at the time, the Athanor, and its next-door companion the Bar of Soap, Dallas' only bar-cum-laundromat).

I actually meant to start my adult career as a novelist with *Beowulf* – I was in my junior year at Southern Methodist University, coming to the end of a class in Anglo-Saxon and an independent study project on *Beowulf*. However, I had a long talk with Dr. Stephen Flowers (author of *Runes and Magic*), and he suggested that it would be better to start with the Völsung/Nibelungen saga, since the story (or a somewhat-altered version of it) was so familiar through Wagner's Ring cycle. This proved to be great advice: a lot of the interest I've gotten concerning *Rhinegold*, and I think the reason it became popular so quickly in Germany, was pretty much for that reason.

I spent the following summer in Scandinavia, travelling around youth hostels by Interrail and meditating on the characters and their background. The main problem for retelling any of the great story cycles – Nibelungen, Arthurian, whatever – is that there are so many versions of the plots and interpretations of the characters to choose from, even in the original sources. With the Rhinegold story, the Norse version differs incompatibly from the German version (i.e., in the German version, Hagan is Gundahari's uncle, the Gundrun character (Kriemhilt) is the main instigator of the destruction of the Gebicungs, and the story ends with Thioderik chopping her head off as soon as she's killed her relatives). The main character problem I had was Sigifrith – he's such a creep in Wagner, and in the older versions, it's hard to tell what really motivates him: of the Norse heroes, he really has the least individual personality. To develop his character, I had to really think about his circumstances and what traits – notably the longing for identity and friendship – lead him into tragedy in the end.

I actually wrote most of *Rhinegold* in a student hovel in Scotland. I'd come in out of the dark and cold, turn on the computer, and drink a few beers or a horn of my homebrewed mead while writing - with Wagner's Ring Cycle turned on so loudly the foundations of the house literally shook. I did this every night. Everyone else in the hovel hated me.

The final part of the research was really a lot of fun. I'd lived in Germany as an exchange student (in Bonn, across from the Drachenfels, in fact), but I wanted to go back. I Eurailed up

and down the Rhine, sampling the local brews and kind of meditating on the characters and their environment. A lot of the descriptions were actually written directly from life; I transcribed them straight from my notebook at the appropriate places.

My year in St. Andrews was also the time when my interest in the study of Germanic religion - mostly the god Wotan – really became focused into a career choice. It was nice to be able to write about the subject without having to cite references every other sentence. *Rhinegold* was also fairly heavily influenced by friends of mine in the Ring of Troth (a reconstructionist Germanic religious movement), to whom the second part is dedicated, and I certainly felt Wotan's presence during the process of writing it.

Rhinegold was published while I was at Cambridge, writing my doctorate on "The Cult of Óðinn: God of Death". At the same time, I was also working on a novel which I called *Helgi*, but which my publishers renamed *Valkyrie* – a rendition of the three incarnations of Helgi Hunding's-Bane and his beloved, who is described as a valkyrie in the prose of the Eddic poems. Embarrassingly enough, in the process of writing my doctorate, I discovered that all the pre-conversion uses of the word "valkyrie" referred *very specifically* to the female spirits exerting Óðinn's will on the battlefield, and that they were not only not meant to be the lovers/spiritual guides/whatever of heroes, but that the one instance where one is, Sigdrifa/Brynhildr, her demotion to loving a human is a disqualifier for valkyriedom and a punishment. Which I should have known, except that the explanatory prose for the Helgi poems (which would have been written in the late thirteenth century, long after the poetry and very long after the conversion) suggested so strongly otherwise, and many more experienced scholars of Norse religion than I were taken in.

In any case, I continued the book. The Helgi poems are a cycle in which the hero – named Helgi every time – and his beloved are born, find each other, die as a result, and get reborn. The first, Helgi Hjorvarðsson, I set at the turning point from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age; the second, Helgi Hunding's-Bane, is a contemporary of Sigemund and Sinfjotli, the latter of whom actually spends time in his warband (in the way such things get conflated, Hunding's-Bane was actually claimed in the poem to be a son of Sigemund's, but neither the timing nor either of their stories would have worked for that). The third poem, the "Lay of Kára", has disappeared, but a synopsis of it remains: the woman is protecting the hero by flying over his head as a swan in battle, and he swings his sword too high and cuts her foot off. I decided to set this version in the modern period; Helgi is a musician coming to a spiritual awakening, and Kára (whose name I modernized to Karin) is a fighter pilot in training. I should say at this point that I finished the final draft a month before the death in training of fighter pilot prospective Lt. Kára Hultgreen - and just shortly after my German editor had advised me that a female fighter pilot trainee was not believable.

Unfortunately, my American publishers hated the third story because it wasn't violent enough (they wanted Helgi to be a gang leader), and my German ones hated it because it was too violent (at least with the implied aggression of Karin's role in the military). We went back and forth on this for years. Ultimately my American publishers substituted *Attila's Treasure* in the contract; the German house paid me off, because they had to, but never bothered actually printing the book. I may try to republish it eventually, but at the moment I'm still considering whether I want to do a major rewrite or not.

Valkyrie was between the first and second drafts when I finished my doctoral thesis (my Ph.D. was bestowed in May of 1995) and moved to Uppsala together with my new wife, Melodi. Living in Uppsala was wonderful for me – I loved the climate, I loved the hunting, I was right by Gamla Uppsala where the great heathen temple used to stand. Melodi was less than enthusiastic about the weather and found the language very difficult.

Nevertheless, we stayed for a while, during which I started a short novella about my favourite character from *Rhinegold*, Hagan. The English and Continental versions of the Nibelungen cycle make it very clear that, while Sigefrith was busy running around in the woods, Hagan was already going to battle and doing a number of other interesting things. I had always intended the story to be based on the *Waldere/Waltharius* mss. – and by the time I got to page 90 or so and Hagan hadn't reached Attila's hall yet, I knew that this was going to be a full-length novel.

Eventually Melodi had had enough of Sweden, and we were having some difficulties with the place we lived, and various other things. So we decided to move to Ireland, where we rented Emmel Castle for a year. A castle and a half, actually: the tower was thirteenth-century, the attached manor house was seventeenth. Unfortunately, the previous owner had done a nightmarish job of half-finished restoration – the front drawing rooms had been mutilated, a surveyor told us the entire manor house roof would have to be replaced within five years or come crashing in, and we occasionally had water coursing down the bedroom wall when it rained. So we left for a nice eighteenth-century Georgian house instead.

Through the process of this, I was working on the most unexpected project of my life. My German editor had always been tremendously fond of the *Gilgamesh* story, and had been bugging me for years to write a retelling. Which I had refused to do: the amount of research required, and particularly research about a culture that I wasn't wildly interested in, would just be too immense.

The reason I changed my mind was a sequence of events that had started as the best experience of my life and ended up as the worst. While still in Sweden, I got a call from the director of the Hannover Opera Company. They were getting ready for Hannover's millennial fair, and wanted to do a Germanic opera. Written by me. This was beyond belief – I believe I leapt up and down a bit, and may have shouted in joy somewhat as well.

So I wrote the first act, based on the story of Wayland/Völundr the Smith. Well and good, except the composer (and to a degree I was never sure of, the director) had additional ideas. He, or they, wanted it to be a sequel to the Ring cycle, starting with Alberich brooding over the ruined world. From there, we kind of compromised to Alberich creating Wayland (along with beasts that become human, etc.) and the story going, more or less, from there, with Wayland escaping Alberich's control as he flies off to find his swan-maiden. And I wrote that version. And then the composer wanted elements of *Gilgamesh* to be worked in – he had fallen in love with the concept of a sacred prostitute and a monster involved in cutting down trees, and came up with this very bizarre libretto outline. And the director assured me that I was the librettist, that in no way was this bizarre outline going to happen, that I could continue with a comfortable heart because I had all his support. And then, with no warning, I was notified that the composer had decided he wanted to base an opera straight on *Gilgamesh*, and I was completely fired. My compensation consisted of a relatively small sum of money and a ticket to the dress rehearsal for *Götterdämmerung* at Bayreuth – at which the Hannover director had arranged to meet me, promising to introduce me to the Wagner family; but he didn't show up and sent me no message to let me know he wasn't coming. I ran around Bayreuth asking for him and getting blank stares for quite a while before I realized what had happened. At least I got to Bayreuth, which many don't, but I'm not sure the payoff was worth the ride.

(I'm not sure if the *Gilgamesh* opera ever happened. Since one of the main attractions in the proposal the financiers agreed to was – ahem! – having the bestselling author of *Rhinegold* write the libretto, I wonder if some of them pulled out when they realized they weren't getting what was advertised).

However, at the time, I decided that living well was the best revenge: I would write a novel, and the Hannover opera could do what I already knew was going to be an appalling version. And, hopefully, I would get the chance to express my opinion of their version somewhere along the way. It took me a good two years of research on Mesopotamia to write *Gilgamesh*, and I had found the Germanic books more enjoyable to write for a lot of reasons. Being unfamiliar with the languages, I had to rely on philological articles written in English or German where I had questions. But my primary difficulty was with the extreme difference in world-view between the Germanic and Mesopotamian cultures. To the Germanic peoples, humans and gods are very close, different less in kind than in degree; varying degrees of apotheosis occur throughout the sagas, and one has to be just an absolute scumbag to manage an unenjoyable afterlife. To the Mesopotamians, even a man that is two-thirds god – Gilgamesh – is irrevocably mortal, and hardly anyone manages a reasonably decent afterlife. The Germanic gods can be argued with, even fought with; the Mesopotamian gods pretty much do as they please without any real thought for humans, except when they feel their

privileges trodden upon, as a result of which they devastate the innocent as well as the guilty. While I found this a difficult view to accept, my problems with it were also useful to the novel, in that Gilgamesh, having seen the gods at near their worst, is motivated to his most heroic effort by the hope of improving things. In any case, despite the work involved in *Gilgamesh*, I was very pleased with the result, and it also allowed Melodi and I to buy the house we wanted.

Once it was written, the most interesting thing about *Gilgamesh* was the intensity with which people responded to it. Those who liked it *really loved* it; those who hated it thought I should be burned at the stake. In the latter case, it was generally for one reason: while I don't read Sumerian or Akkadian, I did consult with many sources and translators. The prophecy about the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is quite explicit. Also, the Mesopotamians were, shall we say, a whole lot freer about sex than the Norse, or most twenty-first century Americans (which is why *Gilgamesh* has a lot of detail in the sex scenes and *Rhinegold* and *Attila's Treasure* mostly don't). Some people went through the roof. Absolutely freaking, screaming, I'd defiled the great epic by suggesting that the phrase "embrace him as a wife" might have actually meant "embrace him as a wife". All I can really say about that reaction is, maybe those people who are dim enough to think that being a hero is limited to a personal sexuality that matches their own – or that all cultures have the same view on the subject as their own – are also too dim to be readers I want.

About halfway through *Gilgamesh*, John Prendergast, a native Irishman, moved in with us, which is why the book is dedicated to him and his cat Mordred (which later turned out to be an iguana, of the rare Furry Tabby iguana breed – John claims not to like cats). He started as my secretary, and is now a writer in his own right, author of the forthcoming books *Floating Down the Liffey* (a humorous Irish crime novel, coming out from I-Universe) and *Draugr* (a horror book about a Viking burial in Ireland). He dragged me back into the Society for Creative Anachronism, from which I had fled screaming some time ago – fortunately the populace in Europe (or Drachenwald, as the area is known in the SCA) is much more congenial than previous groups I had known. Having been interested both in recreating historical crafts and in martial arts for a long time, I took to the crafts and fighting of the SCA very well, receiving my Laurel (a high award for arts and knowledge) in 2001 and winning the Viceregal tourney for the Crown Principality of Insulae Draconis (Britain, Ireland, and Iceland) in 2005.

After *Gilgamesh*, I started work on *Beowulf* at last, but also began another project, the *Falcon Dreams* trilogy, which I wrote together with my wife Melodi. This started out as a mediaeval romance/magical conspiracy story, intended to be a fairly light series sold under a pseudonym. Then it was bought for really quite a lot of money by a German publisher, and we realized that we really needed to give them value for money. In some ways, *Falcon Dreams* was the most difficult project I'd ever worked on: not only did I have to start my research over again (although I had already done a fair amount of reading on the fourteenth-century, and my studies in mediaeval German and English literature were good preparation), but this was the first thing I'd written that didn't have an existing plotline. We did write an outline, and followed it more or less; but a lot of things came up unexpectedly. I suspect that one of the best gifts a writer can have is the ability to integrate unexpected plot twists – that point where you look back over the last forty pages and realize that your characters have gone somewhere you had no idea they were going to go, and you're not sure how to get out of it either – in such a way that the readers can't really tell what you planned from the beginning and what you didn't.

With *Falcon Dreams*, we had to work with a combination of real historical issues (for instance, there is one point where the heroine goes to the court of Karl IV, Holy Roman Emperor – and he travelled a *lot*; we had to be sure that the timing worked for him to have been where we needed him to be) and the situations of the characters themselves. Unlike the settings of my earlier books – anchored in real events, such as the annihilation of the Burgundians by the Huns, but mostly taking place in legendary/undocumentable time – the fourteenth century is pretty well documented, at least for major events. Of course, this also added a certain charm, especially in the context of Satanic magicians conspiring for control of

Europe – we could decide which major historical figures were in the Order of Light-Bearers (Madame du Guesclin, famed as an astrologer and married to the guy who gathered the Free Companies to stick up the Papal treasury, was an obvious choice), who the Order was out to get, that kind of thing (the *Falcon Dreams* trilogy is now available in English in e-book form, through the fantasy section of Double Dragon).

After *Falcon Dreams*, I was finally free to write *Beowulf*. Having had it in the back of my mind for ten years or so, *Beowulf* was probably the easiest of my books to go straight into. Also, since there was only one source for the main character (although many of the sub-characters appear in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Ynglinga saga*), and so much has been written about the underpinnings of the story, most of it was pretty straightforward. Some of the details were obvious from internal logic, too. For instance, Beowulf is a long-distance cold-water swimmer, and tremendously large and strong, *and* his name is a kenning for "bear" (literally "bee-wolf" – i.e., honey-eater). It doesn't take much thought to realize that a man like that is going to have a pretty thick coat of his own insulation, and probably look like a superheavyweight powerlifter rather than a Schwarzenegger-type bodybuilder (apparently at that level of strength a certain amount of fat adds leverage and lifting power to the joints, which is why the guys that squat a thousand pounds don't generally look so trim). And, taking that into account, when the poem mentions that Beowulf was considered a "sleac...æðeling unfromm" (slack, unpromising noble) as a child, it is obvious that he was probably a really fat kid. Especially since the name "Beowulf" suggests a nickname more than a personal name.

As with all three of my previous legendary books, *Beowulf* includes as much of the original poem (translated, like the Old Norse, Middle German, and Anglo-Saxon texts for *Rhinegold* and *Attila's Treasure*, by me – for *Gilgamesh*, I had to seek recommendations and use composites of the best translations) as possible, which is quite a bit. The main changes in it are a lot of additional personal material, filling in the sequence-of-events in the poem; the restructuring of the story into a linear fashion rather than the interwoven sequence of the epic (in which, for instance, you don't find out what happened to the Geatish royal house in Beowulf's youth until he's dead already); and the addition of the native religious underpinnings which were lost or deleted by the time the Christian composer or scribe wrote down the existing text. I was strongly influenced by Roberta Frank's suggestion that Beowulf was deliberately intended to be the opposite of the Völsungs, and indeed, the opposite to the whole Óðinnic version of heroic activity. In fact, his dying "confession", or non-confession, presents him as the ideal Freyr-king: keeper of oaths, keeper of the peace, and so forth. While Beowulf is sometimes interpreted as following the pattern of Thórr – the god associated with the Bear's Son story, slayer of monsters, noted for his physical strength, etc. – the personality of Beowulf, especially as a king, struck me as characteristically Vanic. I pay a particular tribute to Frank's theory with the relationship between Beowulf and his father, who is a berserk and represents the kind of harsh, violent, Óðinnic hero that Beowulf may have been meant as a reaction against.

After *Beowulf*, I decided to try writing something lighter again. I have always loved fantasy – any type of fantasy – and role-playing games in particular. One of the pleasures of writing *Falcon Dreams* was the fun Melodi and I got from subverting romance cliches; I decided it would be entertaining to do something similar with fantasy, and began to write *Empire's Ghost* – the first book of what I hope will be a long series. The plot of *Empire's Ghost* – young man with unusual talents becomes a squire and goes off with a small company of knights and magicians to undertake a dangerous covert quest in the ruins of a great empire – is pretty standard fantasy stuff on the surface. But instead of magical artifacts, the company is looking for a set of genealogies which may stave off a civil war. The hero, Arudal, is a student of philology (and, in a unique way, necromancy) brought along to translate and identify the relevant books; he accepts becoming a squire only as a legal device to keep his citizenship from interfering with his presence on the quest. The Elf in the party is both dangerous and crazy, and it is quite possible that the hero has more in common with the bad guys than with the good guys. Certainly some people, including members of his company, consider Arudal's own nation to be verging on evil (or evil outright) in many regards, even though it is allied with the more general-fantasy-literature-consensus-good kingdom. On a

more serious level, *Empire's Ghost* is a coming-of-age story in which the main themes are culture clash and prejudice (on several sides), and which also gave me the chance to explore the ideologies, faults, and virtues of several social and economic systems in public without (hopefully) getting lynched (a purpose the writing of fantasy and science fiction has served at least since *Gulliver's Travels*). My plans for the series are also inspired by the way Lois Bujold has handled the varying Miles Vorkosigan books, exploring several different genres with the same set of characters in the same world (coming-of-age story, space thriller, heavy psychodrama, delightful politico-romantic comedy, mystery-with-biological terrorism...). The second novel in the series, *Empire's Heirs* (ms. recently completed) is a diplomatic mystery; the third, *Empire's Foes* (in process), is a war story. As the fourth may be as well; it's looking to be a long war.

Other than *Empire's Foes*, I have several other projects in the works – some ongoing, some started and put aside. The most likely for me to concentrate on next are *Maeve's Raid* (a retelling of the Irish epic the *Tain bo Culaigne*, or Cattle-Raid of Cooley, told from the viewpoints of the hero-queen Maeve and her prophetess Fedelm) and *Forlorn Hope* (a Landsknecht novel in a fantasy setting). Set aside for the moment are *Crusade* (my own rendition of the Third Crusade) and *Vikings in Vinland* (the Vinland sagas – prospectively even longer than *Rhinogold*, since there is so much material, especially when the Native American viewpoint is considered as well), which I may get back to if *Beowulf* does particularly well.

I am also in the process of updating my thesis, "The Cult of Óðinn: God of Death?" There has been a lot of work done, archaeological and otherwise, since it was completed in 1994; and, at the time, I was labouring under the word-count limits of Cambridge's English department as well.

And if you would know more, you'll have to check this website again later!