



## ***A Semi-Regular Magazine for Fantasy and Science Fiction Gaming***

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# Editorial

By *Tori Bergquist*

Well amazingly enough I managed to produce issue #45! That makes four issues this year, roughly a quarterly rate of release, which is not too bad given this is a part-time hobby as opposed to an actual job, although the magazine is picking up a bit of steam as can be seen in this issue, with a variety of excellent contributions by various talented authors. Issue 46 will hopefully come out a wee bit sooner than #45 did; there's plenty of material lining up for it, and I've been working on the editing and layout of that issue at the same time as this one.

This issue features yet another *Traveller* article, this time an extensive adaptation of my *Ad Astra* setting to the *Traveller* mechanics, including a variety of new species and some gear. I have always enjoyed the theatrics of that setting, and will try to produce some more material for it in the near future, as well as the *Stellar Expanses* setting that was featured in the previous three issues. The material, of course, works great with minimal adjustment to any *Traveller* setting, and is inspirational for just about any other SF RPG.

The fiction is ramping up in this issue; Dan Lambert offers up a tale straight out of the *Exploitation!* Universe with *Blood & Bullets*, Jody Bergquist (yes, we got married September 26<sup>th</sup> of this year) has provided an interesting fantasy tale of drakes telling ghost stories in *Elder Mysterium* and

Jeremiah Griffon tells a disturbing tale in *Pagan*.

In gaming, we have articles on using the 4<sup>th</sup> edition *Monster Manual* with Basic Role Playing, Jarrod Camiré debuts with an article on cavalrymen in 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, and a large feature article on the *Ad Astra* setting, now at last *Traveller*-ized, among other articles.

As TSS expands, I would love to see more fiction, from new and aspiring authors as well as old pros feeling charitable! One advantage of TSS as a venue for fiction is that people who pick it up to enjoy the gaming articles get the additional treat of some short fiction, which is otherwise very difficult to offer on its own in the PDF industry. Even though the bulk of the PDF market is comprised of "one shots" aimed at a single specific theme in exchange for a nominal price, I feel that the plurality of options made available in a traditional magazine format allows for a broader and more generally entertaining experience. Fiction is a major component of this approach, and is something that TSS and other magazines can offer that a tightly-focused gaming PDF would not be able to.

Anyway, as always reader feedback and contributions are welcome! Email me at [toribergquist@gmail.com](mailto:toribergquist@gmail.com) (I check that much more frequently than the other email) and as always, good gaming!

--Tori Bergquist  
November 18, 2009

## ***Interview with Robert Stikmanz about his book series: The Hidden Lands of Nod***

***Interviewed by Jeremiah Griffin***

Robert Stikmanz is the author of a new series of books which bend and break the rules of science fiction and fantasy, blending both into a new kind of fine literature. I had the pleasure of meeting him recently at a local convention. He has been gracious enough to agree to be interviewed for our magazine and to discuss his books and other projects.

**JG:** Well, Mr. Stikmanz you seem to have a rather interesting and unconventional book series going. How many books have been published so far?

**RS:** So far, the first three novels have been published. *Prelude to a Change of Mind* appeared in 2007, *Entrancing* in 2008, and the most recent, *Sleeper Awakes*, in June of this year. When complete, there will be five books in all. In addition to the novels, my publisher, Dalton Publishing, has also produced a companion to the series, *Nod's Way*, a fantasy divination system that embodies the ancient wisdom of my fictional people.

**JG:** When we last met you had an interesting description of the style and feel of this series. Might you describe it for our readers?

**RS:** I believe I suggested imagining the love child of Jack Kerouac and Carlos Castaneda as channeled by Terry Pratchett. I write just to the left of that.

**JG:** Well, that alone might interest some of our readers, but perhaps you could describe a bit of the setting of your series with out giving too much away?

**RS:** The setting for *The Hidden Lands of Nod* series is a collection of realities identical to the one we inhabit, but canted a few degrees. The gravity--and the levity--of these other realities affects ours, but we can't directly observe them only through imagination. A premise of the series is that legendary elder races, the puissant little people of myth and lore, actually exist; however, they have withdrawn to exile in a parallel existence because violent, rapacious human society makes for dangerous neighbors. Because this existence, the reality we share, is their home, they are unable to simply abandon it. They must remain engaged, trying to influence the course of human events in order to assure their own survival. *The Hidden Lands of Nod* brings the legendary beings forward into a contemporary setting, following a team of dwarves--or *Dvarsh*, as they call themselves--and the humans with whom they ally in a grand struggle to save a world in which creatures of the imagination live and love.

The first two novels of the series, *Prelude to a Change of Mind* and *Entrancing*, are set twenty years apart, and take place in a possible recent past. *Sleeper Awakes*, the just released third novel, moves the story

another generation forward into a possible near future. *Prelude to a Change of Mind* introduces the story of Meg Christmas, and recounts her first days in the company of two Dvarsh. With the Dvarsh comes a troop of singing empathes, beings the Dvarsh call *Thrm*, but old tales among humans misremember as elves. As the title implies, *Prelude to a Change of Mind* is an adventure of consciousness, but it rides a deliberate erotic current to its conclusion.

*Entrancing* is specifically a sequel to *Prelude to a Change of Mind*, in a way no other book in the series will relate to any other. It is a novel I wrote at the specific request of my editor to follow through with more of the story of Meg Christmas. Twenty years after the events of the first novel, she has come to understand and develop more of her unique ability to simultaneously inhabit multiple realities. Vast forces of universal conquest overrun the cosmos, the Dvarsh marshal a desperate defense, and Meg searches the corners of being for answers to issues unresolved from the days of her awakening. Where the first book is more contemplative, *Entrancing* picks up the threads and runs with them in a ripping good yarn.

The third book, *Sleeper Awakes*, moves slightly into the future. Its first section is entitled, "A Day After Yesterday." Despite this chronological relationship to the first two novels, it is actually the book I drafted first, and also (IMHO) the best starting point for a reader. This is the story of an unintended traveler, Boyd, and his journey across a society in collapse. The lone survivor of a catastrophe that kills millions, he is pursued by an assassin charged with erasing anyone who contradicts the official

version of events. Along the way he is befriended by mages of the Dvarsh, the incredibly cool emissary of an extraterrestrial civilization, and an odd assortment of human characters. *Sleeper Awakes* is a much larger book than the first two, but fast paced, with lots of action, wry wit, trippy exploration of the nature of reality and a love story.

At this time I have begun revising the detailed outline for the fourth novel, *Rataxes, the General*, but I have not yet committed to a finish date. Before turning full attention to that project I need to complete the dictionary of the Dvarsh language for release by Dalton Publishing in July 2010. At this time, all I'd like to say about *Rataxes, the General* is that it will center around the investigation of three murders, each in a different reality. I plan for it to be at least as large a book as *Sleeper Awakes*.

The final book of *The Hidden Lands of Nod* series will be a short novel on the scale of the first. Provisionally entitled, *Another Noon*, it exists as an outline and a set of character notes that will eventually draw all the story lines together. My current plan is to see it into print before this world ends in 2012.

**JG:** You have already outlined your ideas on how this series will eventually play out, but if it were possible how would you feel about the prospect of other spin-offs such as comics or, better yet, a role playing game based in *The Hidden Lands of Nod* universe?

**RS:** One of the other hats I have worn is that of video artist, a role to which I am planning a return with the first Dvarsh

language feature. This will be a mix of illustration and animation that will be posted in three to four minute episodes as I finish them. Planning on this project is at the stage of a partial script and a few preliminary images, with a first episode in the second half of 2010. After an intense focus on narratizing over the past three years, having a project involving lots of illustration is a pleasure to contemplate. The rationale for structuring it as a series of short episodes is so I can budget time. The project that will have to share attention with completion of the Dvarsh dictionary and, of course, two more novels. Fortunately, I've always found that organizing several projects side by side, especially in different media, accomplishes wonderful things through cross-fertilization.

I have to admit the idea of a role playing game is an appealing one, but that kind of design is outside my expertise. A third party design would have to be licensed through my publisher, but if the right designer came forward with the right proposal I would not hesitate to endorse it. Comics interest me less, largely because my illustration style does not lend itself to that medium. I'm not yet ready to trust visualizing my world and characters to another artist; however, again, if the right artist and writer put together the right proposal, I would endorse it.

My editor argues strongly for a line of action figures. Frankly, I'm dubious about action figures. Maybe if they were formed from plant-based resins instead of from petroleum products....

**JG:** Who or what would you list as the greatest influences to your writing if you believe there are any?

**RS:** My influences as an author are many and varied. The one I cite most often is Doris Lessing, the Nobel Prize winner. I was already in awe of her work when she decided in her sixties to change direction completely and begin writing future fantasy. It was a decision that probably delayed her Nobel by twenty-five years, because, after all, the prize committee just didn't go around handing out medals to writers of that fantasy trash. Finally, 2007, she was awarded the prize anyway. I, for one, never doubted the brilliance of her speculative fiction. Her entire *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series was a revelation, unlike anything else I had seen in breadth of vision and originality of approach.

Other books and authors that helped steer me onto the path I follow include Tolkien, Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy, the *Don Juan* books by Carlos Castaneda, and Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*. The list could go on and on, but that's enough to suggest a trajectory of development.

As an illustrator, my influences are not primarily fantasy artists per se. I owe a debt to the surrealists, especially Magritte and Tanguy, and to de Chirico. Art Deco is prominent in my composition and design aesthetic. I have also always been fascinated by nineteenth century botanical engravings and by paintings on black velvet.

**JG:** Now that we are on the subject of your art, I am reminded that you told me that you do your own cover art. Do you do all of the art that is featured in the series? Are we to assume that the style and images shown on the covers and such are the kind and style of imagery found in the world of your books?

**RS:** With a few exceptions, yes, it's my work. I did not design the label on the *Nod's Way* box or a couple of promotional pieces, but even those use my illustrations and the Dvarsh calligraphic script. As a matter of fact, I originally devised the Dvarsh script to be a recurring feature in illustrations related to *The Hidden Lands of Nod* series, thinking I would make "words" by stringing together the glyphs in varying sequences based on appearance. When I actually began to devise the Dvarsh language, I already had its unique script to hand. As you suggest, the appearance and application of the script is meant to be emblematic of Dvarsh culture. This is also true of the illustration in the *Nod's Way* oracle book, and of the greeting cards series, *Proverbs of the Dvarsh*. It is less true of the illustrations on the covers of the novels. Those are more purely Stikmantic, to coin a term. My intent with the cover illustrations is to embody an allegory of each tale, rather than more prosaically illustrate a scene from the book. The images are created as independent works that I have made available occasionally as fine art prints, and more recently as post cards.

In the coming year I plan to spend more time illustrating the world of the series. On the "to do" list is a reference set of portraits of key characters. Before I can get to that, however, I have to complete a redesign of Dvarsh writing forms for the purpose of making a font, which is an important step in preparing the dictionary.

The subject of the *Nod's Way* oracle has come up a few times and since it is being featured in this issue as well, perhaps you could tell our readers a little about it.

*Nod's Way* is a fantasy divination system that consists of the ancient wisdom book of the Dvarsh and a set of three oracle dice. Although I developed *Nod's Way* as a companion work to *The Hidden Lands of Nod* series, it is a freestanding toolkit for divination play. Familiarity with the novels is not necessary for enjoyment of this oracle.

The context within the world of the novels is that seventeen thousand years ago a mysterious clown figure came to dwell among the Dvarsh. This clown, known as Nod, taught a body of precepts that became the core of the oracle book. The place this book occupies in Dvarsh culture is similar both to the *Tao Te Ching*, as a text for study and contemplation, and to the *I Ching*, as a tool for divination practice.

When the book is consulted for divination, the questioner obtains a response by casting the oracle dice. These include two identical eight-sided dice each featuring four phases of the moon and four star symbols, and a six-sided die that has emblems on only two sides. This last comes into play only if one of those symbols come up; the two eight-sided dice determine the basic response. Each of the possible combinations of their symbols corresponds to one of the thirty-six auspices of the oracle book.

The Dvarsh have a formal method of consulting *Nod's Way* that involves three casts for each issue on which clarification is sought. However, a point I like to stress is that the right way to use an oracle is any way that makes sense and has meaning for the questioner. When I demonstrate this system at conventions and other appearances, I encourage people to cast the dice once, without formulating a