

From Fire and Thorns to the Bitter End:

An Interview with Young Adult Author Rae Carson

Like many emerging authors, Rae Carson entered the writing world by way of various other life experiences. Moving around a great deal as a child gave her an insight into life and how to handle herself in various school and, later, social situations. So from cheerleading to actually playing flag football, from college to a variety of adult jobs, Rae emerged from adolescence into adulthood with a take-charge attitude.

Although some of these attributes appear in Elisa, her main character from *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* (Greenwillow, 2011), Rae stated in this interview that she is actually more like the character of Elisa's confident older sister, Alodia. The journey from adolescence to published author of a successful trilogy—beginning with *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* (September, 2011), continuing with *The Crown of Embers* (Fall, 2012), and ending with *The Bitter Kingdom* (August, 2013)—has launched her career as a young adult writer. Creating the fantasy kingdoms of Orovalle and Joya d'Arena has drawn teen readers immediately into the fantasy adventure of battling royal families.

Rae was invited to the 2012 ALAN Workshop in Las Vegas as a participant in the opening panel on Fantasy with Maggie Stiefvater, Shannon Hale, and Kristin Cashore. As the Moderator/Chair of this panel, I first met Rae through the communications necessary to organize the panel. I learned that she lived close to me, so we met for lunch to begin a further exploration



of her work. Hearing her tell so much of the story behind the story, I felt it needed to be shared. The result is this *ALAN Review* article.

Each member of the ALAN fantasy panel writes about strong female characters that are plunged into complex worlds of high fantasy, so that was our starting point as we met that day. Rae talked about giving her lead character a Godstone—a precious jewel bestowed only every one hundred years to one child born into this conflicted and warring world. The as yet unleashed power of the Godstone begins in *The Girl of Fire and Thorns*. This was Rae's debut into young adult fiction, and it was quickly recognized, earning nominations for the William Morris Award as well as the Cybils, the Andre Norton Awards, the Publisher's Weekly Flying Start, and ALA's Top Ten Best Fiction for Young Adults.

KSH: Let's begin with your background and preparation to become a writer. You have told me writing has always been part of your life. What choices and decisions did you make to prepare yourself to become a writer?

RC: I've been writing my whole life. At first it was all thinly disguised Star Wars fanfiction. It evolved into stories about little girls whose parents make them wash dishes, who then rebel against this egregious oppression and run away to have adventures and find their *real* parents, because they were

secretly *adopted*. Now, of course, all my writing is *high literature*. (Sword fights! Magic! Kissing!) My most profound growth as a writer came when I joined an online critique group. What a harrowing, terrifying, wonderful experience that was. *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* is the first book I ever finished, but it came after years and years of honing my craft on throwaway projects.

I was a Social Science major in college, with an emphasis in secondary education. I took as many courses on the American colonial era and westward expansion as I could. This turned out to be wonderful preparation for writing fantasy novels. Studying the prime movers of history—economics, religion, sociology, etc.—and how they both shape a nation and place that nation in an international context helped me build the *Fire & Thorns* universe.

In fact, when teens ask for writing advice, I tell them not to hesitate to major in something besides English or Literature if their passion lies elsewhere. The craft of writing can be honed without formal education through dedication and practice. But I've heard from a lot of teens who are put off writing—and even reading—because they believe these activities to be within the strict purview of English classes. Mathematicians and scientists read and write, too! I'd love to see more middle and high school teachers who are not teaching English develop classroom libraries. Our message to kids should be that reading is for *everyone*.

KSH: Would you talk about *The Girl of Fire and Thorns's* journey to publication? It was nominated for a William Morris Debut Novel award and received starred reviews. Could you talk about working with an agent and then an editor?

RC: Getting published was a long, difficult road. I wrote *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* back in 2005, and publishers weren't sure what to do with it. It was roundly—though narrowly—rejected on the adult market. I suggested to my then-agent that it might be a young adult novel. She disagreed, and this book languished on my hard drive for years.

One day, a visit to my local bookstore revealed that the market had changed. The young adult section had exploded! A few trips to the

library later, I was convinced that my book was indeed a young adult novel. With encouragement from some friends, I decided to end my relationship with my current agent and seek a new one. Holly Root agreed to represent me, and she is wonderful. This time, the book had multiple offers and sold within twenty-four hours of submission.

My editor is Martha Mihalick of Greenwillow Books. Martha is amazing. She pushes hard for me to always reach that next level of perfection. At the same time, she is committed to making sure my books conform to *my* vision for them. Sometimes, we get on the phone to talk out a particularly tricky point. We always go through several rounds of edits, which is how I prefer to work. I find that by fixing certain things, I'm able to pull back layers and see my way clear to other necessary changes. Revising, for me, is both the hardest and most gratifying part of the process.

Authors get all the credit when our books turn out well, but there is an invisible team behind every book. I'm incredibly lucky to have an agent who matched me to the right publisher, and a talented editor who helps me bring out the best in my stories.

KSH: From your website and companion blog, you seem to enjoy “talking/blogging” to your audience. What are your thoughts about reaching your audience through social networking? Do you read all your blog comments? (<http://www.raecarson.com/>)

RC: I tend to get personal on Twitter (@raecarson) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/raecarsonbooks>). I decided a long time ago to be unfiltered and wholly myself in these areas of social media. I've been very happy with the results of this decision. I feel that I get lots of interaction and loyal support. So I'm grateful for my Twitter and Facebook followers every day. The website feels more like “official Rae” to me, so I reserve it for strictly book-related things. I read all the comments I get on Twitter, Facebook, or my website, though I don't always have time to respond to each one.

KSH: Are there any books that are special to you as a reader?

RC: *Island of the Blue Dolphins* will always have a special place in my heart. I read and reread that book to tatters as a kid. I still have the first two paragraphs memorized, and I blame Scott O'Dell for my obsession with survival.

Another book that holds great meaning for me is Karen Cushman's *The Midwife's Apprentice*. My mom became pregnant when I was 22 years old. It was a difficult, late in life pregnancy, and for various reasons she chose to give birth at home assisted by a certified nurse midwife. So leading up to the big day, I called her up, told her to lie down and rest, and I read *The Midwife's Apprentice* to her over the phone. She loved it. My baby sister was born in January, exactly a year after that book won the Newbery Award. I was present during the birth, and I gave the midwife a heart attack by yelling Cushman-isms like, "Push, you cow!" This is how I learned that a woman who laughs mid-contraction sound much like a honking goose. (If you're reading this, Mom, I'm still sorry!)

Recently, I've enjoyed Wein's *Code Name Verity*, which is a tour de force of plotting, and Roth's *Divergent*, which showcases some of the most masterful action prose I've ever read. A book I got a sneak peak at and am looking forward to sharing with everyone else this fall is Alison Cherry's *Red*, a satirical portrayal of conformist society that still manages to convey so much warmth and charm.

KSH: Schools and teachers often invite authors to their classrooms or for workshops. What are some school visits or presentation experiences you have enjoyed that might provide insight for teachers who are planning author visits?

RC: I had a fantastic visit to Oklahoma City this year, hosted by the Metropolitan Library System. I spoke to several classes about the process of becoming a published author and my own personal journey to publication. It was a blast. Many teens in my audience were future authors. Even more were passionate readers. The questions they asked demonstrated a tremendous ability to grasp complex literature and fully interact with it. The most powerful lesson I've learned while visiting schools and libraries is to never underestimate a teen reader.

This spring I also taught a workshop about turning personal passions into story ideas. Teens' capacity for introspection is enormous, possibly because this is the stage of development where teens become aware of themselves as active participants in the identity-forming process. So we talked about the things we loved/hated/were fascinated by and how to turn those things into fiction.

Connecting with readers is very important to me, even from a creative standpoint. I find it refreshing and inspiring to emerge from my author cave and interact with my audience. I admit, it can be harrowing; teens are as gloriously unpredictable as the weather here in Ohio. But there is nothing more amazing in the whole world than having a teenager shyly approach me after a talk to say, "I feel like you wrote this book just for me."

I've started experimenting with Skype. Just about every author I know would love to do more school visits, but the travel involved reduces precious writing time. Skype seems to be a good compromise. It allows me to connect with readers without having to do laundry, pack, and jump on an airplane. I hope to do more of this in the next year.

KSH: Are there any themes you specifically set out to emphasize or others that developed as you really got into the storyline and plot? On your Greenwillow blog, you discuss body image in great detail. Can you speak to that a bit more?

RC: I set out to write a story about claiming one's own destiny and self-perception. Everything else is tangential to that—even the "body image" aspects. Throughout the course of the trilogy, Elisa learns to claim her own identity instead of letting it be formed by the judgments of others. This holds true whether it is her appearance, her faith, or her ability to rule.

Body image, though, is such a hot button issue that it tends to attract a lot of focus. A common question I get when I'm talking to readers in person is, "Exactly how fat is Elisa?" For some reason, this is very important to people! I try to remind readers that "fat" is a perception that varies individually, that one person's idea of "fat" might be totally different from another's. I have an ex-boyfriend, for

instance, who thought a size 6 was too fat. What a jerk. It was this idea of perception that I was trying to play with. At the story's outset, Elisa perceives herself as fat. But her perception changes. Is it because she truly changes outwardly? Or is it because she comes to see herself differently? In my mind, it's a little of both. But the important thing to me is that she is eventually able to wrest her identity away from others and own it herself.

KSH: At the ALAN Workshop last fall, part of the panel discussion dealt with strong female characters. Would you talk about your strong female characters and developing their strengths?

RC: When I was 4 years old, the first Star Wars movie blew my mind. I especially loved Princess Leia. I dressed as Princess Leia, complete with shiny hair buns, for Halloween two years running. But Leia got rather insipid once she fell in love, which I didn't like. So even though I continued to dress up as Princess Leia, I secretly wanted to be Luke Skywalker. I wanted to have a light saber and join the rebellion and train with Yoda to use the Force.

I think a lot of little girls are in this position. We want to be Harry Potter and Percy Jackson and Aragorn. We want to fight battles and end up king of everything. Not because we're tomboys, but because we want to be just as *powerful* and *victorious* as these characters. Unfortunately, from a very early age we're taught in thousands of subtle and insidious ways that we're sidekicks. Decoration. Afterthoughts. Defined by the boy who loves us, our worth based on how physically attractive we are to others. The worst stories, for me, are those that show a girl falling in love, like Princess Leia in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and consequently giving up her power and identity. So *The Fire and Thorns* trilogy is my Luke Skywalker story. Except instead of the Force, there is magic navel bling.

KSH: The world and language of your books seem to have strong Spanish influences. How did these Spanish overtones end up in your book?

RC: When I started writing these books, I lived in California's Central Valley, an agricultural Mecca heavily populated with first- and second-generation

Spanish speakers. I decided to teach myself Spanish, which turned out to be less intimidating than I feared, simply because the Latino American culture is one of hospitality, sharing, and warmth. So the Spanish influences arose naturally from my immersion in the culture, as well as a desire to honor the friends and neighbors who welcomed me into their homes, caught me up on the latest *telenovela* developments, and taught me how to make tamales.

KSH: Discuss "plunging into the world of self-publishing" and creating your short stories that are available online only. Your website refers to a free short story, *Dangerous Voices*.

RC: It's very important to me that I understand my chosen industry and its ongoing developments as well as possible. So I self-published a short story and offered it for free—just to learn about the process and test the system. It was a huge success, with over 100K downloads in less than 5 months. I've since removed it from Amazon, but I think I'll make a point of providing free content for readers on a regular basis.

I'm very happy with my publisher. I'm in a great situation, with an editor I love and a marketing team who has my back. So I have no plans to self-publish for profit anytime soon. If I do, it will be because I have a project that I feel is uniquely suited to self-publishing, i.e., something experimental that might be outside my established reader-market. It would be a business decision made in full disclosure with my current publishing team.

KSH: You have also written some online-only novellas based on characters from the world of your books, including "The King's Guard," "The Shattered Mountain," and "The Shadow Cats." Could you discuss writing this short form of fantasy?

RC: Yes, all three novellas are set in the *Fire & Thorns* universe, published by Greenwillow/HarperCollins. The first novella, "The Shadow Cats," was my publisher's idea. They noticed that *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* was doing particularly well in e-sales, and decided to try releasing an e-only story as an experiment. I thought it was a great idea. So I wrote a story about a secondary character that fleshed

out the world from her perspective. HarperCollins sold it via online retailers like Amazon and Barnes & Noble for a fraction of the price of a whole book. The story sold well enough that we decided to do more, which is how “The Shattered Mountain” and “The King’s Guard” came about.

It’s funny . . . with the first one I struggled quite a lot, simply because writing at a shorter length is a completely different art form. I’m very proud of it, and I’m delighted to share it with readers. But I feel strongly that the lessons I learned while writing “The Shadow Cats” allowed me to do a much better job with “The Shattered Mountain” and “The King’s Guard.” The third novella is about Hector, who is a major character in the trilogy and a POV character in *The Bitter Kingdom*. So it also helped that I already had his voice in my head when I wrote his story.

KSH: Currently, you are working on a new series entitled, “*The Goldscreyer Saga*.” Is this the working title or the final name for the series? What inspired it?

RC: Yes, that’s the working title, but by no means final. It’s an historical fantasy trilogy set during the California Gold Rush, and it chronicles the adventures of Lee Westfall, a 16-year-old girl with the magical ability to find gold. The first book is a wagons west story—kind of like *Little House on the Prairie* except on steroids, because magic! And murder! (And dysentery!)

It’s a fascinating time period. The California Gold Rush had profound sociological and economic ramifications, not just for the United States but internationally. It also has interesting implications for feminist theory—it remains one of the only times/ places in history where women had equal economic opportunity to that of men. I’m looking forward to exploring all of that.

Another thing that fascinates me about the era of westward expansion is the romantic idea of “the rugged individual.” But my research into the Gold Rush is showing this to be pure myth. Not everyone was a Charles Ingalls, hacking a living out of the earth with his own two hands. In fact, an adult reread of the *Little House* books clearly shows

his utter dependence on kindly neighbors. Humans are social creatures, and our greatest achievements—and even our morally atrocious ones, like displacing a native population to realize our “manifest destiny”—have always been team efforts. So my Gold Rush trilogy will feature a large, ensemble cast of pioneers who rush west for different reasons but must come together in order to survive and thrive.

KSH: This last question is about *The Bitter Kingdom*, the final volume in the Fire and Thorns trilogy just released last August. What can you tell readers about saying goodbye to this first experience at a very successful YA trilogy? Do you have plans for a book tour?

RC: Saying good-bye is hard. I’ve lived with these characters for years, and they feel like close friends. Of the three books, *The Bitter Kingdom* was the hardest to write because I had so many details and themes to bring full circle. At the same time, I’d been cogitating on them for so long that it was an absolute joy—maybe even a cathartic relief—to finally craft the conclusion I’d been planning. For me, the level of satisfaction gained from a creative endeavor is directly proportional to its difficulty, which means I feel very satisfied!

Trilogies, it turns out, are as different an art form from novels as novels are from short stories. An entire trilogy arc requires tremendous investment and patience, from both author and reader, and I’m so grateful for every reader who has weathered this journey with me.

In late September, I’m hitting the road for the HarperCollins Children’s “Dark Days” group tour. Dates and locations haven’t been announced yet, but I do know there will be five of us, all promoting our latest science fiction and fantasy novels for teens. This is my first official tour, and I am thrilled, akin to a little kid who can’t wait for Christmas. It feels as though this tour will mark a transition, when I can finally say “I’m done!” and move on to new things. The Fire and Thorns stories are ending, but mine, I hope, are just getting started.

Conclusion

Rae Carson's *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* trilogy joins the ranks of Kristin Cashore's enticing *Seven Kingdoms/Graceling* series, Shannon Hale's *Princess Academy*, Rachel Hartman's *Seraphina*, Catherine Fisher's *Incarceron*, Robin McKinley's *Damar* series, Tamora Pierce's *Alanna* and the *Beka Cooper* series, and other wonderful fantasy worlds where girls take a strong stance as decision makers and powerful influences in the forces of the universe. Young adult readers will observe these female characters develop into the courageous women they eventually become through the challenges created by Rae Carson and other authors who build these compelling and unique fantasy worlds.

Karen Hildebrand was a library media director, reading teacher, and children's literature instructor for Delaware City Schools, Ohio Wesleyan University, and Ashland University in Ohio. She has served as chair of the IRA/CLR Notable Books for a Global Society Award, currently serves on the Notable Books for the Social Studies, is a Holocaust teacher fellow for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and serves on the Board for the IRA Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group where she is coeditor and contributor to the Reading Today Online book review column. She received the Outstanding Middle School Educator Award from NCTE's Ohio affiliate, OCTELA; the Innovative Practices Award from the Ohio Educational Library Media Association; A Governor's Award for Excellence in Science; and 1990 Teacher of the Year for Delaware City Schools.

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