

June 2011 - GARTH NIX / SEAN WILLIAMS / Books for Keeps

Garth Nix and Sean Williams have the look of men who only know where they are by what day of the week it is; so, as it's Monday, and they're just back from doing two schools in Salisbury, they're pretty sure they must be in the Athenaeum on Piccadilly. Life on the road.

While readers in the UK will be well aware of Mr Nix, who has been delivering his own brand of bestselling fiction to them since his debut here in 2001 with *Sabriel*, Mr Williams is another story. He's a science fiction and fantasy writer with over seventy short stories and twenty seven novels under his belt; he's also won multiple Aurelius and Ditmar Awards, and been at No 1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list with his *Star Wars* novelisation *The Force Unleashed*, but until now he's never been published in the UK in a major way.

Both men live in Australia but they are not neighbours, Garth living in Sydney and Sean in Adelaide, so the obvious first question to ask them, once we've settled ourselves, is how they met each other. "The first time I remember meeting Garth was on a panel at the Brisbane Writers' Festival, in I think 1998," says Sean, "although we knew of each other before that."

Science fiction and fantasy is, adds Garth, a small community in Australia, in fact a small community world wide, with everyone knowing each other. "We became friends," he says, "partly because of some lunatic in the audience who interrupted the panel [we were doing], raving about how he'd been abducted by aliens and, as we wrote science fiction, we had something to do with it." Noticing the man had a big bag with him, and they were in the deep north of Queensland, the Aussie equivalent of the deep south in the US, Sean and Garth were aware that he could well have come armed. "He raved for a while and then just left, and we bonded over surviving the experience."

Having become friends they talked about working together for years, but never had the right idea. "Sean's written thirteen books with Shane Dix - and we joke that he can only work with people who's names end in 'x' - but this is the first time I've ever co-written a book with someone." Did either

of them remember the moment ‘the right idea’ appeared? “I had a very basic notion,” continues Garth, “just a paragraph, which I thought was interesting but I didn’t know where it would fit in with all the things I was doing; then I wondered if Sean might be interested.”

In this conversational relay race, Sean seamlessly picks up the baton. “Garth rang me up and said he had a title - *Troubletwisters* - and it would be about twins, and there were a couple of other odds and ends.” The two talked about the idea, which at that point, says Garth, was much like the small piece of grit in an oyster, and quite quickly found they had a story.

As an individual writer it’s hard enough dealing with the mechanics of storytelling - everything from arguing with your characters over what they’re prepared to do for you, to unravelling intransigent plot tangles - but how does it work when two writers, two necessarily autocratic egos, are involved? “There are lots of different methods, and no one does it the same,” says Sean, Garth nodding in agreement. “We spent a lot of time in each others offices, discussing ideas and bouncing things off each other.” For *Troubletwisters*, Garth carries on, they began the process at a science fiction convention in Melbourne, continuing over half a dozen sessions until they’d produced a chapter-by-chapter synopsis and had drawn a map of the fictional town of town of Portland where the action takes place. “Once we had worked the story out to that level of detail I wrote what became Chapter 1, and parts of what became the prologue, and then Sean wrote another thousand words and that’s what we sold the project on.”

Once the deal was done, Sean then sat down and put together a complete first draft, according to the plan. “Sean writes very quickly, which is one of the benefits of working together, then it came back to me and I rewrote it.” Was that just a tinker, or did he really rewrite it? Garth nods in assent to the latter. “I took out probably 10,000 words and put back in maybe 15,000; the first draft went from about 40 to about 65 thousand words. We then kicked it backwards and forwards several times.”

Working with friends, while not as open to problems as say working with family, can have its moments. Had they laid down any ground rules about what to do in the event of a possible car crash of opinions? “We both have

our own separate careers,” says Sean. “and with some sixty books between us, the investment we have in *Troubletwisters* is in *Troubletwisters*, not in our personal sense of self.” But they did have an actual written agreement, adds Garth, which established how everything should work.

Sean might have had more experience of co-writing, but, as Garth was quick to point out, he is an ex-editor himself and very used to working closely with writers on their projects. “And we had an editor to listen to as well,” he points out. “We had David Levithan [at Scholastic] in New York, who’s also an author himself; but Sean and I have very similar tastes and neither of us is very precious.”

I wondered if the co-writing experience had meant they’d seen a different side to each other, but Sean was adamant that their agreement would not allow him to divulge that sort of information, although he felt that they had probably learnt a lot about each other from touring together.

Having had an idea they’d found they both wanted to work on, and had then sold, were they surprised that it was more than just one book they were talking about, or had they always planned a sequence? “Right at the beginning, I can’t remember,” said Garth, “but by the time we’d plotted out the first book we knew it was more than one, but never as many as seven - after *Keys to the Kingdom*, bloody hell...seven’s [a lot], I didn’t want to do that again, that’s for sure!”

Neither wanted to do a trilogy or any type of closed-end series, adds Sean, they’ve sold the idea as a five-part series - less than seven, more than three, a good compromise of a number - but a series that doesn’t have a definite over-arching narrative. “The books are episodic, but in the end we couldn’t help ourselves and there is a kind of over-arching story, although not one that concludes everything. But there is a satisfying ending,” he says. “Stories are as long as they need to be, and if this one had needed to be a nine-book series, we might’ve had to sit down and have a bit of a discussion about it!”

A number of reviewers have pointed out that *Troubletwisters* joins a large and very popular canon of coming-of-age-and-finding-magical-powers stories. Were they at all worried that they’d be judged for making that

choice? Not a jot, comes the unison reply. “That was totally intentional, seriously!” says Garth, Sean adding that they are both fascinated by this type of story and had wanted to write what they’d loved to read when they were ten years old.

“I’ve written quite a few books with extraordinary children who end up with powers,” Garth continues, “so we deliberately did this; these things are all in the execution, it’s all how you do it, and it’s up to other people to decide if we’ve done [our job] well enough to separate the book out from the rest.”

A good story is a complex mixture of intriguing plot, memorable characters and the way the two are woven together. In *Troubletwisters*, along with the heroes of the piece, Jack and Jaide, and the mysterious Grandma X, there is the shadowy personification of darkness, The Evil, whom we never actually get to meet. Will that happen in subsequent books? Messrs Nix and Williams stonewall, stating that they would rather not answer the question. Suffice to say, though, we haven’t seen the last of The Evil, and it’s only going to get worse. “Just as with evil in our world now,” says Sean, “The Evil can take many different forms and shapes, which makes it more threatening and horrible.”

They may have plans and outlines, but there is still a lot left up to a combination of chance and the realities of collaborative writing. “I think I know exactly what a particular section or idea might be about,” says Sean, “but until it’s verbalised or put down on a page, and Garth gets a look at it, neither of us is aware we’re thinking different things...really there’s a third writer between us, the two of us working together creates a third writer that is neither wholly one of us but a different person entirely. Until the book is under way, we don’t know what that third writer is going to produce.”

Apart from more *Troubletwisters*, what are the two individual writers up to, and what can we expect to see from them? “I’m finishing up *A Confusion of Princes*, which is my big space adventure set in a massive galactic empire,” says Garth. “It’s a coming-of-age story, and a becoming-human story...there are ten million princes, who are genetically enhanced and

surgically augmented, and they have psitek, mektek and bitek powers and are infinitely superior to normal humans, whom they rule.”

There are, as you might expect, a lot of planetary and space battles, and contact with aliens, on top of which it’s also the first novel Garth’s ever written totally in the first person. “It’s a challenge, but I’m really enjoying writing an arrogant smart-arse. I’m at the stage where I’m moderately pleased with it!”

Sean, for his part, is on the third draft of his first off-contract, on-spec novel since 1992. “It’s a 15-plus YA science fiction novel called *Twinmaker*, which is set in this world, in the future.” But not, he hastens to add, a future he wants to say is in any way dystopian. “I’m aiming to present a version of reality, which I’m enjoying immensely as I can take as long as I need to write the best book I can...it’s quite liberating, unlike the stupid situation I was in a few years back where I had to write 100,000 word novel in a month, 4,500 words a day, every day. That was insane, but a lot of fun, because you live and breath the book. And the book wasn’t terrible, I like to think!”