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“Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin, <http://www.playsonideas.com/>”

Transformation Means Never Knowing What Will Happen Next

Authors Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin interview each other

WIM: Often when we tell people that we write in collaboration, their eyes cross and they look really puzzled. Then they ask us questions.

PAT: Usually the first question is something like, “How do you write together and stay married?” Obviously, both writers have to be fascinated by some of the same ideas and by similar ways of handling them. But most importantly, we enjoy exploring ideas, characters, events, details and sometimes being surprised by them. We have more invested in discovery than in “self-expression.” The heart of the creative experience is a state of “finding-out.” And that’s a great adventure, especially with the companionship of another creative and compatible person.

But then people want to know how that works on a practical basis. Does each of us do a separate part of the writing? Do we have different strengths?

WIM: When we’re working on, say, a novel, we often just pass materials back and forth. Instead of an outline, we typically have a calendar showing when things happen. Whoever has an idea for a particular moment or episode plunges right into it, drafts it, then passes it back to the other, who works on it, then passes it back again. Eventually, an episode finds its way into the whole work. By the time we’re through, we often don’t have any idea who wrote what exactly. Our shared objective is making a story work.

But I think our focus is different. You see the big picture, the structure, while I work on moments—on things the characters do and say. Often I have very little idea what happened before or after the moment I’m working on. You hold the whole “arc” in your head. Between the two of us, we manage both the forest and the trees.

I suppose our way of working together, our mutual fascination with the process and our love of surprise, affect the themes and ideas we like to write about.

PAT: We’ve often annoyed other writers by saying, “Quit your day job; do whatever’s most important.” That way, we’ve succeeded a bit and sometimes failed hugely, but life has been pretty rich. So, no surprise, one of our themes is risk. In *The Magic Book of Kin Ich*, some characters move beyond everyday reality—not fearlessly, but with curiosity and determination to discover what’s there. These aren’t action heroes. They might be rather ordinary people except for their refusal to limit themselves to an ordinary world.

Their experience changes them. And change is another of our favorite themes.

WIM: Yeah, and it's no accident that we met working together at the office of Brain/Mind Bulletin, a newsletter dealing with consciousness research. Personal transformation is a huge theme of ours—how people change in truly profound ways, and how human nature itself is in a state of evolution. I think this puts us at odds with today's literary writing, which presents humans and human nature as static and permanent.

Maybe that goes back to Faulkner claiming that authors have always written about the same things because “there is nothing more to be said.” And when Stanley Kubrick died, the novelist Diane Johnson wrote an article about him. She began by admitting that she hadn't seen him for years, then added, “but do people change after all?” I found that shocking.

How can you be in the business of storytelling and not believe that people change—or that human nature itself changes?

PAT: How can you be in the business of living a life without believing in change? In *The Magic Book of Kin Ich* and some of our other books, technology represents change. It puts the characters under different kinds of pressure, into new kinds of environments where they must contend with their personal issues and challenges. A virtual environment propels Lydia to a new level of shamanistic power—just as new technologies and extreme situations can sharpen sensitivities for all of us. In that eerie and unfamiliar territory, Lydia finds herself in spiritual and mortal danger. And to varying degrees, that can be the real-world consequence of risk-taking.

What does all this finally mean for our characters—or for anybody else?

WIM: Like Lydia, our protagonists learn to abdicate certainty and safety. Life is risk. Transformation means never knowing what will happen next—or even what or who you will become. Nothing that's evolving ever knows exactly where it's going.