

## Special Feature:

Interview with Multiple-Award-Winning Author Carol Berg

By

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Carol Berg is a fantasy writer who lives in Colorado. Since *Transformation* was published in 2000, Carol Berg's novels have won the Prism Award for best romantic fantasy (*Daughter of Ancients*), the Geffen Award, given by the Israeli Science Fiction Society for best translated fantasy (*Transformation*), and the Colorado Book Award (*Song of the Beast*). They have been short-listed for the Compton Crook/Stephen Tall Memorial Award and for the Barnes and Noble Maiden Voyage Award, both given for the best first science fiction/fantasy/horror novel of 2000 (*Transformation*). In 2002, *Restoration* was short-listed for the Romantic Times Book Club Reviewers' Choice Award for the best epic fantasy. Her books have made the *Locus* fantasy and science fiction journal bestseller list and have been translated into Russian, German, Czech, Hebrew, and Polish.

### Tell us about your new novel, *Flesh and Spirit*:

*Flesh and Spirit* and *Breath and Bone*, the two volumes of *The Lighthouse Duet*, are probably more integrated than any two of my books so far. They shape one large story about a man searching for his place in a dying world.

Valen is the rebellious son of a long line of magical cartographers in a society where pureblood sorcerers live a privileged and highly constrained life. Valen hated that life. He ran away at fifteen and has spent the years since trying to have a good time, keep his stomach full, and avoid notice. Survival is getting harder and harder, though. The natural world is in ruinous upheaval, from plague, pestilence, and strangely skewed weather. At the same time, the fertile, wealthy kingdom of Navronne is embroiled in a civil war, and a legion of doomsday fanatics has decided that the only way to set things straight is to destroy cities and drive everyone out into the countryside. Of course, Valen has his own issues – a nasty little addiction problem, for one, and the dismal conclusion that at twenty-seven he is not really very good at anything. The story opens when a comrade and fellow deserter abandons him in a rainy wilderness, starving, wounded, and with only his boots and a stolen book of maps that legend claims can lead men into the “realm of angels.” When he’s given sanctuary in a nearby monastery, a brotherhood of scribes “given to charity and good cooking,” Valen thinks he’s found the solution to all his problems—a roof for the winter, a bed, and three meals a day—although, alas, no girls. But instead—

Well, that's the crux of the matter! We've got monks and princes, secret societies, fanatics, and beings who walk right out of myth, and someone is stealing the eyes of the dead.... It's a big story.

**What most distinguishes *The Lighthouse Duet* from your other two series, *The Bridge of D'Arnath* and *Books of the Rai-kirah*?**

One of my early readers commented that in these books, the world itself is one of the characters. So you might call this my first foray into environmental fantasy! This is also my first take on characters whom other stories might call "the fae," but really aren't at all - mythical beings who cohabit the world, but who, in essence, are not human. Thematically, the Books of the Rai-kirah dealt with the transforming power of human relationships and a warrior's journey of faith in a world where the objects of his faith shifted out from under him, while the Bridge of D'Arnath series dealt with the transcendent power of love and family. The Lighthouse books deal with the other side of these coins – the destructive power of broken relationships, broken families, prejudice, greed, and fear.

But Valen is the heart of these books, and he is quite unlike my other heroes. Whereas Seyonne (of the Rai-kirah books), at his core, knew exactly who he was, grounded in duty and compassion taught by his family, and Seri and Karon (of the Bridge series) remained steadfast in love and honor throughout their trials, Valen has no such steady grounding. Though he thinks of himself as an easy-going, mead-loving, give-the-girl-a-good-time kind of guy with lots of friends, he has essentially spent his life alone, and by the time we meet him, he has learned a lot of hard lessons about the world. He is not ambitious, not noble, and not dedicated to any good cause except staying alive in an increasingly dangerous world. Intelligent, but not intellectual, he's bothered a bit by the fact that he's never found any occupation that he's particularly good at, certainly not the sorcery that his horrid family so prizes and wants to sell to the highest bidder. But he can laugh at anything.

**You also have another project coming out, a novella in a compilation called *Elemental Magic*. Tell us about that project:**

*Elemental Magic* is the third in a series of romantic fantasy anthologies from Berkley. Each book comprises four themed novellas, two from fantasy writers, two from romance writers. In the case of *Elemental Magic*, each novella centers on one of the four elements: earth, air, fire, or water. My story, called "Unmasking," is the "water" story. It tells of a young enchantress who has immense talent, but forever fails when she attempts to use it in "great deeds", and a young man born without any scrap of talent for magic among a people whose sorcery defines their every activity, every action, and every choice. When a spy is detected crossing the border, putting their country's security at risk, these two are chosen to carry off a tricky deception that involves the nature of magic. *Elemental Magic* will be released in November of this year.

**How did writing a novella compare to writing a novel?**

I was a bit wary when my editor asked if I would be interested in writing a 25K word novella. I've written exactly one short story that remains firmly in my trunk, and my novels average 170K words. I just don't think "short." But after coming off two intense years working on the Lighthouse books, I was ready for something less demanding, and the encouragement to attach the story to one of my existing worlds tempted me. I took the opportunity to return to the world of my Rai-kirah novels, setting the story about forty years before the opening of *Transformation*.

It turned out to be a delightful experience. I had a very limited time frame in which to write the story, which helped me tell myself "no" whenever I was tempted to...digress. And having already developed the world enabled me to pare down the elements that needed to be included. But it was definitely a challenge to get a multilayered story of the kind I like into such a tight word count, without making it a complete muddle. The two techniques I found the most helpful were focusing on a short timeframe—the action takes place over about three days—and trimming characters—fewer characters equated to fewer subplots. So it all came down to focus. Once I got that under control, I found I had plenty of opportunity to develop both the relationship of the characters and the larger story in which they were involved. When I submitted the story, it was 24,994 words – which made me very proud!

**Did writing a novella inspire you to write some even shorter fiction in the future? This question is, of course, purely unselfish on our part.**

The answer is a resounding maybe. (Three months ago, the answer would have been no way.) The novella certainly gave me more confidence that I could write shorter without sacrificing my love for language and rich characters. But I believe that true short fiction is an art form akin to poetry – and I don't know that I can pack that much wallop in less than 25K words!

**Both *The Bridge of D'Arnath* and *Books of the Rai-kirah* address questions about the nature of the soul and essence of individual identity. Why do you explore these issues in your writing?**

I don't consciously set out to write about these issues (or any issues, as a matter of fact). It's kind of a surprise when I can come up with statements such as "the transcendent power of love and family" with regard to something I've written! My first aim is always to tell a good story about interesting people involved in cool adventures. I love a good dollop of mystery along the way. I like to set these adventures in worlds and societies that are not exactly like those we know, yet seem very real to the reader. To me, real implies complex, that is, not black and white, but many shades of gray. And of course, story implies people in conflict with each other and/or themselves. I happen to enjoy stories where these conflicts happen on many levels, including inside the

heroes, heroines, and villains—which is where these questions of identity and spirituality often come into play. When you challenge people with extraordinary circumstances, they often have to reach deep inside themselves for answers. And yes, as you might have guessed from the description, *Flesh and Spirit* addresses these issues yet again, as Valen discovers that his destiny is not to visit every tavern and bed every woman in Navronne!

**You've dedicated a lot of your time to helping other writers with their craft, such as volunteering at the Colorado Gold Conference, and mentoring young writers in Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers, the Poudre R-1 International Baccalaureate program, and writers' workshops. You've presented writing workshops at Colorado Gold, RMFW monthly program, Metro State, CU Denver, Pikes Peak Writers Conference, Colorado Writers Workshop, World Science Fiction Convention, World Fantasy Convention, Opus Fantasy Arts Festival, and other science fiction conventions in the US and in Canada. You were also a guest faculty member at the 2006 Surrey International Writers Conference in British Columbia. Why do you spend so much time giving back to fellow writers?**

For eight years, I wrote as a hobby. Working full time and managing a family, I didn't have time for creative writing classes. I wanted to spend what writing time I had *writing*. I am fortunate to have an excellent formal writing foundation from my school days, and I have always been a reader, which is the most important of all writing apprenticeships. But where did I learn to hone my fiction-writing skills? From articles written by authors sharing what they knew, from contest judges who managed to give me both encouragement and useful critiques, and from pros who shared their experiences and insights at writers' conferences, on panels, and at the lunch table. Every time I learned something new, I would go back and revise all my stories, and with each turn, my work improved. I have always had a love for teaching – it runs in my family. And now that I have chucked the day job, and the boys are on their own, it is just great fun to pay back some of this marvelous education that was provided for me.

**Speaking of giving back to fellow writers, what is the most important piece of advice you give to up-and-coming writers, especially in the fantasy genre?**

Well, I can't keep it to just one piece of advice. It's more like three big ones!

1. Read, read, read, Read good writing. Read across genres.
2. Write, write, write. Revise, then write more. Find serious fellow readers/writers with whom to exchange critiques. Learn to give critique and learn to take it.
3. Learn the craft of writing. Learn grammar, learn the cliches of your chosen genre and how to avoid them (this is particularly important for fantasy writers where cliches are rampant thanks to the heavy influence of Tolkien imitators and D&D-like role-playing games!). Learn about maid-and-butler dialog, said-bookisms,

and using your opening to make a contract with the reader, always remembering that craft does not diminish art.

**Fantasy as a genre seems to have really developed over the past several years, both in terms of the quality and quantity of writers on the market. It has also become more "mainstream" in terms of being marketed to a larger audience through television and film, the most recent examples being the successful "Heroes" at NBC and HBO's decision to produce George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* as a series. To what do you attribute this recent surge in fantasy? Would you be interested in seeing any of your work made into a movie or television show?**

I hope that this infiltration of fantasy into the mainstream of best sellers and popular media is a result of people recognizing the marvelous storytelling possibilities of fantasy. Fantasy is our oldest form of storytelling, and for centuries people didn't think twice about the fact that legitimate truths about human nature and human relationships could be revealed through fantastic literature. "Realistic" fiction is a fairly recently invented genre.

I would be delighted to see one of my stories well dramatized, and, crassly speaking, it pays very well. But I don't know if I could bear seeing someone else's vision of Valen and the Danae, or Seyonne or Aleksander or Seri or D'Arnath's Bridge or Aidan's dragons. And to see a story chopped and chewed and spat out as unrecognizable as was Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* would break my heart. In general, I think short fiction translates to the screen better than novels. On the other hand, if I could see a *Flesh and Spirit* mini-series so well done as the A&E *Pride and Prejudice* or Mystery's *Brother Cadfael*.... Truthfully, I have a lot more books to sell before any of this ever becomes an issue.

**Although you've only been a professional writer for seven years, you've achieved much success from the standpoint of awards and sales. What would you would like to accomplish in the future?**

I would love to see my books stay in print, constantly read and enjoyed. I would love to continue to hear from readers that my stories make them think, make their lives richer, inspire them to pursue their own love of writing, or just have a few terrific hours of adventure. And a World Fantasy Award would be very nice.