



***A Storm of Swords* has done extremely well. It seems as though it's done better than some of your earlier works.**

Well, the series certainly has, yes. It's doing better than I've ever done before, which is really gratifying.

One of the things I find encouraging about *A Storm of Swords*' success is that it's a vast book and people are reading it. That's wonderful. What is it? 120,000 words? More?

Well, it's 1,500 pages in manuscript. I think I would have been too frightened to figure out what that is in words. It was amazingly long. [Laughs]

Was it a long haul?

Yes it was. I was several months late turning it in and there was a lot of pressure there at the end to finish it. But I finally got it to a place where I was satisfied with it. But then it's on to the next one of course, so... the readers read the books much more quickly than I can write them. Which is disheartening. I work for two years on a book and it comes out and two days later I've got my first e-mail: When is the next one coming out? [Laughs]

And you're on a book tour right now?

Yes.

So not much writing going on while you're on tour?

None whatsoever. I need my own place. I need my office and my settings. I've tried. I have occasionally taken a laptop with me or in the old days a notepad or something like that. But I can't write, really, except in my own setting with my office around me where I can really get lost in the world that I'm creating instead of the world around me.

Where is your office?

In Santa Fe, New Mexico. I've lived there for the last 20 years. Originally I'm from New Jersey.



From a distance Santa Fe seems like a peaceful place to make books. Is it?

It's a beautiful place and it has many of the amenities of a large city and yet it's only 70,000 people so it's a gorgeous place to live. And the climate is great. We get all four seasons, which I like, but not too extreme, which I also like. And I'm addicted to the food there; the Mexican food is the best in the world. Green chili gets under your skin.

This is the first of your books that I've had the opportunity to read. It seems very closely tied in to history, but would you call it a fantasy novel?

It's definitely a fantasy novel. It has dragons and so forth in it. It does have the feel of historical fiction. I love history. I wanted to get a lot of sense of history in *A Storm of Swords* and the other books and some of the feel of historical fiction. Historical fiction is wonderful to read, but the only problem I have with historical fiction is that I know too much history. So I always know what's going to happen. So you're reading a novel about the War of the Roses and no matter how good or bad it is, you know who is going to win. With this sort of thing you can take people by surprise. It reads like historical fiction, it feels like historical fiction but you don't know how it's going to come out.

Most epic fantasy or high fantasy has a quasi-medieval setting. Ever since Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*. So, in that sense, it's squarely in the tradition of many of the writers that have gone before. What I try to do is give it a little more of the feel of historical fiction than some of those other books had before it which have, I suppose, a more fantasy or fantastic feel. My take on the genre has somewhat less magic and sorcery onstage and more emphasis on swordplay and battles and political intrigue and the characters. Most of all: the characters.

Political intrigue is definitely an important component of your work.

Yes. Definitely. It's fun. [Laughs] Although I begin to think my imagination pales with what's going on in the United States right now. [Laughs] My characters are more direct. They whip out a sword and kill their opponents. [Laughs]

What led you to writing these very physically large books that have also become so large with their fans?

Well, fantasy fans like big books. *The Lord of the Rings* was really the first. *The Lord of the Rings* came out of the time when most publishers – especially in science fiction/fantasy – wanted close to 60,000 words. They did not want big books. That's really why it was divided into three: because *The Lord of the Rings* is really one book and Tolkien had envisioned it as one volume, but it was divided into a trilogy to meet the standards of the time. In some ways, he set the tone for all the writers to follow. I think there were several important things about that book, as well. Number one, it had a very large cast of characters. Number two, it created a secondary world – Tolkien called it –



and that, I think, is essential for epic fantasy as it's done today: the world actually becomes a character. People talk about going to Middle Earth instead of just reading. You get that sense that they want to vanish into a created world, so you need to create it with its history and its background and its details. You need to give them the sense that it's a rich and varied and complicated and living place. Like the real world. That takes a certain amount of wordage. It's not simply a matter of unfolding a plot. You want to paint a complete picture.

There's a lot of back story, as well.

A lot of back story. Yes.

Is there a lot of back story in your books that we're not really ever able to see?

There's more back story than I reveal. Of course, I reveal a little more in each volume. In my series in particular, much of the key to the future lies in the past and the successive revelations of what happened 16 years ago and what we think is true maybe isn't necessarily true. In that process of revelation sometimes I'm taking the story forward, but I'm also taking the story backwards with each successive book where you're learning a little more of what happened. But there's more back story than I'll ever reveal. I have notes and details on many of the kings who were just sort of mentioned in passing and again Tolkien, who was the master of this form, showed the way to do that. He published all his appendices – I don't think I'll actually publish my notes and appendices – but if you look at the back of *The Lord of the Rings* there are pages and pages of appendices and the detail with which he created that world was amazing.

I think you have to do the back story in a book like this like an iceberg: most of which would be below the surface. Just enough to show that something huge is there.

The first book in the series was *A Game of Thrones*?

That's right. It came out in 1996. I started writing the series in 1991. I didn't write it continuously because I was still working in television and film a lot of the time.

How many books are you planning for this series?

There's eventually going to be six. Right now there's three. *A Game of Thrones*, *A Clash of Kings*, *A Storm of Swords*.

What does the R. R. in your name stand for?



Raymond Richard.

Though people probably always ask you that.

Yeah. Though usually I'm a smartass and say: "My middle name." [Laughs]

What kind of things did you do in television?

Well, I was on staff for *The Twilight Zone* revival that CBS did in the mid 80s. And then I was on *Beauty and the Beast* for three years. After that I mostly did development deals. I was creating my own pilots for new shows. I was doing some film scripts for features, some of them adapting my own work, some originals and some adapting other people's work. Nothing ever got made though. It was one of the things that ultimately frustrated me and drove me back to books. Books were really my first love. I kind of missed doing them anyway. There's a freedom there that you don't get in Hollywood. There's a full canvas to paint on so you don't have to worry about compromising: having to fight with directors or networks or studios. But the real telling thing was that, although I was making a lot of money in Hollywood writing these screenplays and developing the pilots, they weren't getting made and it was just ultimately unsatisfying. No amount of money can really take the place of... you want your stuff to be read. You want an audience and four guys in an executive office suite at ABC or Columbia is not adequate.

Was the series germinating at the time?

Yes. Well, certainly after 1991 when I started it. Whenever I put it aside it would continue to taunt me. I would find myself thinking about it even to and from the studio or before I went to sleep at night. Sometimes on vacation. So the characters stayed with me. That was one way I really knew that this was a series I had to write: this was a story I had to tell.

So you envisioned it as a series from the beginning?

Oh yeah. Initially I thought it was a trilogy but that was really before I started writing it.

Are you already working on book four?

I am.



Does it have a name yet?

A Dance with Dragons. The fifth one will be *The Winds of Winter*. And the sixth one will be named later. [Laughs] I don't have that title yet.

It's a very competitive genre. There are a lot of people writing fantasy/historical sagas. And your books have really risen through all of that. Do you have a sense of that too?

I have. I've seen the difference from book to book. It's really been building. I'm getting very large crowds on this tour, at signings. Whereas, with the first book, when I toured I was happy if I got a half dozen people. Now I'm getting 100 people, 200 people.

That helps the backlist sell, as well.

The backlist is selling very well. And my old backlist from my pre-television books are being brought back out, too. Four of my older novels are being re-released.

How many books have you written?

It depends. Before this series I wrote four novels and probably about a half a dozen short story collections. I've also edited books. The *Wild Cards* series had 15 volumes and a couple of other projects where I was an editor, as opposed to a writer. So I suppose I have 30 or 40 books in my bibliography right now.

It sounds more satisfying than the television work.

Ultimately, yeah. I mean, there are different satisfactions to each one. When television and film is working well – when you have a good team and you're on the same page – it's very exciting to be working with good actors and a good director, putting something together and watching it come alive before your eyes. Watching dailies. Those are unique thrills. But that same thing can easily turn bad, you know, when the writer and director don't get along. When your actor insists on changing all your dialog. When the network is giving you notes that totally rip up part of what you were trying to do, then the experience isn't so thrilling.

With a book I am the writer and I am also the director and I'm all of the actors and I'm the special effects guy and the lighting technician: I'm all of that. So if it's good or bad, it's all up to me.

Do you bring some of that with you? Some of those film production values?



To an extent, yeah. I mean, I'm a very visual writer. And when I describe a scene, I see it in my head much as a director would see a shot. I see how the light is falling and where the characters are standing – “blocking” they call it in Hollywood – and I think working in Hollywood sharpened my dialog. That's something you spend a lot of time with in Hollywood: polishing your dialog.

Has Hollywood come calling with regard to the series?

I have had some interest in the book, yes. I don't know if anything is going to come of it.

Can you encapsulate the saga for someone who isn't familiar with your series?

Well, sure: how many hours do I have? [*Laughs*] It takes place in an imaginary world called The Seven Kingdoms of Westeros which is a mediaeval type world, but there is some magic in it. There were dragons in the past, although at the time the story opens the last dragon died out 150 years ago.

Probably the thing that most separates Westeros and the Seven Kingdoms and the world that we're familiar with is that the seasons are out of whack. Instead of each year having four seasons that come on roughly predictable dates, the seasons are completely random and they last for years. At the time *A Game of Thrones* – the first book – opens, people think summer is ending, but it's been a very long summer. Ten years of summer. But now the days are shortening, it's growing colder and they think summer is ending. Of course, when seasons last for that long it's a very significant development because winters are extremely hard. They last for a long time and they can cause devastating things. You don't want a long winter.

Against this background you have a dynastic struggle going on for control of the kingdom: the Seven Kingdoms which is actually one kingdom, though it was formerly seven kingdoms. Now it's all ruled by a single king. Several of the great houses are contending for control of that throne.

In the far north you also have a great wall of ice that's 8000 years old and is built across the entire continent manned by an organization of sworn brothers called The Night's Watch who have no families and swear to devote their knight's service to this gigantic 700-foot wall of ice against whatever lurks in the north. And whatever lurks in the north, we're about to find out.

Ah: *The Winds of Winter*.

Yeah.

Where did this world building come from for you? Can you isolate it?



Some of it comes from my historical researches. I don't do one-for-one kind of translations. Some readers have tried to do that: "This character is Richard III and this character is..."

Don't you hate that? Like your own creativity isn't enough.

I do. But I do draw inspiration from things I read in history but a lot of it just comes from imagination.

But world building. Like Frank Herbert was inspired by political unrest and ecology and things. So I was wondering about the seasons. Was that based on something that interested you or did it just seem like a cool thing?

I think I liked the symbolism of it. Winter and summer and what they mean. We all have winters in our lives and it doesn't just mean the cold seasons. Summer is a time of growth and plenty and joy. And winter is a dark time where you have to struggle for survival.

In terms of the history, how much historical detail can you use without it sounding too much like our own world?

I think you have to put in a fair amount.

Because you want readers to relate to your creations?

Yeah. And you want the sense of verisimilitude. In fact, I think most fantasy novelists put in too little. I mean – let me qualify this by saying there's a lot of brilliant fantasy out there. A lot of people doing good work. Tad Williams did a terrific trilogy. Robin Hobb is doing wonderful work right now. Of course Robert Jordan's books have millions of fans. And there are older writers like Tolkien in his day and others. But, putting that aside, there are also a lot of writers who are less than terrific and, although their books tend to have a mediaeval setting, you look at it and it's like Disneyland. They've got castles and kings and knights.

And damsels. Don't forget the damsels!

Damsels, yes. But they don't have the dogs in the halls of the castles scrapping under the table. They don't have the disease and the starvation. All of these things existed, too. I think you really have to have both. That's where the research comes in. You have to know what a tournament was actually like and how mediaeval wars were fought and have some understanding of the battle and



the weapons involved. So I've tried to bring that sense of gritty verisimilitude to my books and the fans seem to like it, so I guess I'm doing something right.

Do you have a writing schedule?

I get up every day and work in the morning. I have my coffee and get to work. On good days I look up and it's dark outside and the whole day has gone by and I don't know where it's gone. But there's bad days, too. Where I struggle and sweat and a half hour creeps by and I've written three words. And half a day creeps by and I've written a sentence and a half and then I quit for the day and play computer games. You know, sometimes you eat the bear and sometimes the bear eats you. *[Laughs]*

Are your books very carefully plotted? A room with maps or anything?

I keep maps but, no. I don't do any of that. I have a general idea of where I'm going but I let the characters meet me and the twists and turns along the road come out in the writing.