

## Interview of Robin Hobb / Megan Lindholm



**Allan** : *As your stories are recognised everywhere, I think it is of no use to introduce you to fantasy addicts but could you tell us how you succeeded as writer ?*

**Robin** : I don't think there are any rules that always work for finding success as a writer. I believe that for personal success, the writer must write stories that he himself enjoys. I write fantasy because it is something that I enjoy reading. I try to write characters that I would like to have as friends or ones that I think would be interesting to know.

**Allan** : *As a reader, Which authors made you dream ?*

**Robin** : The first name is obvious: JRR Tolkien. Throughout my life, at different ages and at different places in my life, different writers have appealed to me. To give a complete list of them would be like reciting half the library! But some that were very significant were Rudyard Kipling, Theodore Sturgeon, Robert Heinlein, Peter S. Beagle, Robert Howard, T.H. White . . . the list is already getting too long! The contemporary writer I am most excited about right now is George R. R. Martin.

**Allan** : *We have recently decided to make interviews with non-french authors ; Thus you are among the first. So I wanted to ask you how is the Fantasy genre perceived in the United States ?*

**Robin** : In the US, fantasy is one of the 'genres' along with mystery, romance, science fiction and westerns. We are not taken as seriously as 'mainstream' writing. The odd part, to me, is that most of the best sellers these days (in the US) seem to incorporate many elements of fantasy. Only, in my opinion, they don't do it as well as the genuine fantasy writers.

In the US, fantasy books often win very high places on the best seller lists. So although we may not be as 'respectable' as the mainstream books, I feel we earn just as high a readership.

**Allan** : *In the same way, what is the opinion of the official press about your stories ?*

**Robin** : The mainstream newspapers don't seem to pay a great deal of attention to fantasy. When a book or an author sells so well that they must take notice, they sometimes seem to ignore that the book is fantasy or science fiction. I do think that the genre walls are beginning to give way. I don't think the average reader cares very much about whether the book is respected by the literary critics or press. The reader just wants a really good story.

**Allan** : *Before talking about your books, have you read some French authors ?*

**Robin** : Unfortunately, not much contemporary fantasy and SF is translated into English. So my knowledge of French writers would be limited to the classics, such as The Little Prince, the works of Alexandre Dumas, the works of Jules Verne, etc.

**Allan** : *You said to me during our mail exchanges that you want the translators' work to be recognised : In your opinion, is the translation necessary for a books' life ?*

**Robin** : The reason I think it is important to recognize the translator's work is that the quality of that translation greatly affects how a book is received in that language. A poorly translated work simply will not succeed. Most of the translators I have meant are passionate not just about language but about communication. They don't translate just words; they translate the story and how it is told. They are fascinating people.

**Allan** : *What sort of exchanges do you have with them : do you meet them, do you follow their work ?*

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**Robin** : I've had email exchange with a number of translators for my books : French, Spanish, Hungarian, Chinese—It doesn't seem to matter what language they work with, I have found all of them to be interesting people. In some cases, we have exchanged only a few letters about specific issues. In others, friendships have blossomed and lasted for years. I think I have known Arnaud Mousnier-Lompre the longest of all of them, and it has been a wonderful friendship. His comments and questions have given me insights into not just translation, but language itself. I value my contacts with translators tremendously.

*Allan* : You have got several prizes for your work : are they important for you or is it just folklore ?

**Robin** : This question is a bit unclear to me. I think you are asking if the money I am paid is very important. Well, obviously, how much money I am paid makes a great difference in my life! But I think that the money is not why I write books, nor can it determine what kinds of books I write. Money always comes after the books are written, and in the end it reflects how many readers buy the books. So, in some ways it is a measure of success. But I think that I would still be writing these books even if I were just putting them away in a box under the bed. Writing is what writers do. Selling the stories is secondary to that.

*Allan* : I have made a mistake in the translation, saying "price" instead "award". So can you tell me what are your feelings when you receive awards ?

**Robin** : Aha! You were looking for the word 'prize' as opposed to 'price' ! Well, awards are very nice to receive. They give public validation to a writer. But in some ways, the awards are like the money: they always come after the hard work is already done. When I was a much younger writer, I desperately wanted to win the Nebula award. It's given by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. I gave a lot of thought to what sorts of stories and books won that award, and tried to think what sort of story I would have to write to win it. (As I said, I was much younger!) I actually tried to write in a way that might win that award for me. But it didn't work. I couldn't even finish the story. I think it was because I was writing it for someone else's standards rather than my own. To this day, although I've been nominated several times for the Nebula and the Hugo, I've never won either one. The awards I have won I do enjoy very much and I am thankful to have won them. They say to me that I story I cared about was valued by other people. So, in that way, awards are important to me. But I would never sit down and write a book or story only in the hopes of winning an award.

*Allan* : You use two identities : Robin Hobb and Megan Lindholm... Is there differences in the writing style or in the subjects between those two identities ? or was it just a way in the beginning to protect yourself against Fantasy's bad press?

**Robin** : I think that the stories I write as Megan Lindholm have a darker cast to them than the ones I write as Robin Hobb. Hobb is a more intimate, detailed way of telling a story. As Megan Lindholm, I write more contemporary fantasy stories. Robin Hobb's story-telling voice doesn't really lend itself to writing very short stories. Megan Lindholm's does.

*Allan* : If we take the "Farseer Trilogy" who made you famous – in France in any case –we quickly see that emotions and feelings are an important part of the story : do you think it is a feminine aspect of writing or it is an old stereotype who strikes back (the emotive aspect is always there but we would only see it when it is a woman who writes the story)

**Robin** : I think it is a more recent type of story-telling, rather than a masculine/feminine difference. I see this even in the newspapers. It used to be that the news story told only exactly what had happened, without opinion. Now, in the US at least, it is difficult to find news that is not editorialized. People always ask 'why' and 'how did you feel about that' and 'what were you

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thinking?' If we are only told exactly what the person did, we don't feel like we really know what happened at all.

*Allan : When we read different chronicles, we could see several times opinions saying that action is long to arrive in the "Farseer Trilogy" but also in the second trilogy : is it important for you to describe precisely a universe and characters before developing the action ?*

**Robin :** I think that with fantasy, it takes a bit longer to bring the reader into the world and establish the setting and what is going on. Without that backdrop, it is hard for the reader to know why events are important. Most fantasy readers are very patient with discovering a world. They enjoy very large books that let them enter a world and explore it. In fantasy, the setting can be almost as important as the plot to the reader's enjoyment.

*Allan : Ship of magic takes place in a different world... the relationships between the characters are not established and we are under the impression that we live three different actions : writing it must have been more difficult.*

**Robin :** Ship of Magic and the other Liveship Traders books actually take place in the same world as the Farseer trilogy. The events in the ship stories take place after the events in The Farseer stories and before the stories told in The Tawny Man. So the events in Bingtown and the Pirate Isles and even some of the characters affect the events in Tawny Man. I told the Liveship Trader story from several points of view because I knew that the story would be happening over a very wide area, and that no one character would be witness to it all. I don't think it was harder to write, but it was different to write.

*Allan : Moreover, how do you write, especially trilogys : do you write a groundwork of the unit that you develop later or do you write it all in a shot ?*

**Robin :** I usually have a rough outline of where the story is going to go. As I write, I take a lot of notes and keep a file of details, so that I don't contradict myself. But if I get an idea to go in a different direction while I am writing the story, I will often experiment. Basically, the outline gives me one possible way to write the book. In the end, the finished book is usually very different from the outline.

*Allan : What is typical of your stories is the quality of the characterisation, especially the personality of your characters : do you base them on existing people or are they built by the story ?*

**Robin :** I think that fantasy characters have to be products of their own world or they are not believable. I could not take a woman from the twenty-first century and put her in a story set in a very primitive world and expect her to be believable. It just wouldn't work. So, no, I don't base characters on real people. I may use a detail, such as how a person walks or what a person looks like, but not a whole character.

*Allan : In France, the Gypsy will be published in April... You have written it with Steven Brust : why did you want to write a story with Steven ?*

**Robin :** Steven and I had been friends for a number of years, and had collaborated on shorter stories in several anthologies about a city called Liavek. Steve came up with the idea of The Gypsy. We actually wrote it quite a long time ago, in a series of letters that we exchanged before the days of email. Steve and I lived at a great distance from each other, so almost all the work was done by mail. It was a fantastic writing experience, something that I've never duplicated.

*Allan : What is the way to succeed in this particular exercise ?*

**Robin :** I think the answer is not to force it. It has to be a story that fits both writers, and one that is better told by two writers than by one alone.

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*Allan : Have you something in progress ?*

**Robin :** I am currently at work on book two of The Soldier Son Trilogy. Book one, Shaman's Crossing, has been published in the US. Book two, Forest Mage, is the one I am still writing.

*Allan : Have you other projects ?*

**Robin :** I tend to take on too many projects at once. I have a number of short stories I am working on, but the books always come first.

*Allan : You said to me that you visited Fantastinet and I thank you : what do you think of our work ?*

**Robin :** I think that you have a very interesting site. As a fantasy writer, I have to be very happy to see more French sites about fantasy. There seems to be a lot of enthusiasm and interest. I think that French interest in fantasy is growing and that sites such as Fantastinet are helpful to the readers and will grow along with the readership. And I very much like that you give space to translators as well!

*Allan : You easily accepted our interview : is contact with readers very important for you or is the act of writing something more personal ?*

**Robin :** I enjoy talking to readers. I have a newsgroup at sff.net, (<http://webnews.sff.net/read?cmd=xover&group=sff.people.robin-hobb&from=-10>) and readers are always welcome to contact me there if they have questions or comments. I used to try to answer by email, but I began to run out of time. So, I answer questions there to try to have more time to work on the books.

*Allan : What can we wish you ?*

**Robin :** Please wish that I manage to finish Forest Mage very quickly. I'm already past my deadline!

*Allan : Do you want to add a last word ?*

**Robin :** Thank you for the opportunity of reaching French readers. [http://www.rivagesmaudits.com/news.php?id\\_a=128#128](http://www.rivagesmaudits.com/news.php?id_a=128#128) is a website for French readers who would like more information about the books or to communicate with other readers.