



Brandon Sanderson

interviewed by Nathan Morris

*Brandon Sanderson has written several fantasy novels, including *Elantris* and the *Mistborn* trilogy. He is writing the twelfth book in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. Website: brandonsanderson.com*

How did you become interested in being a writer?

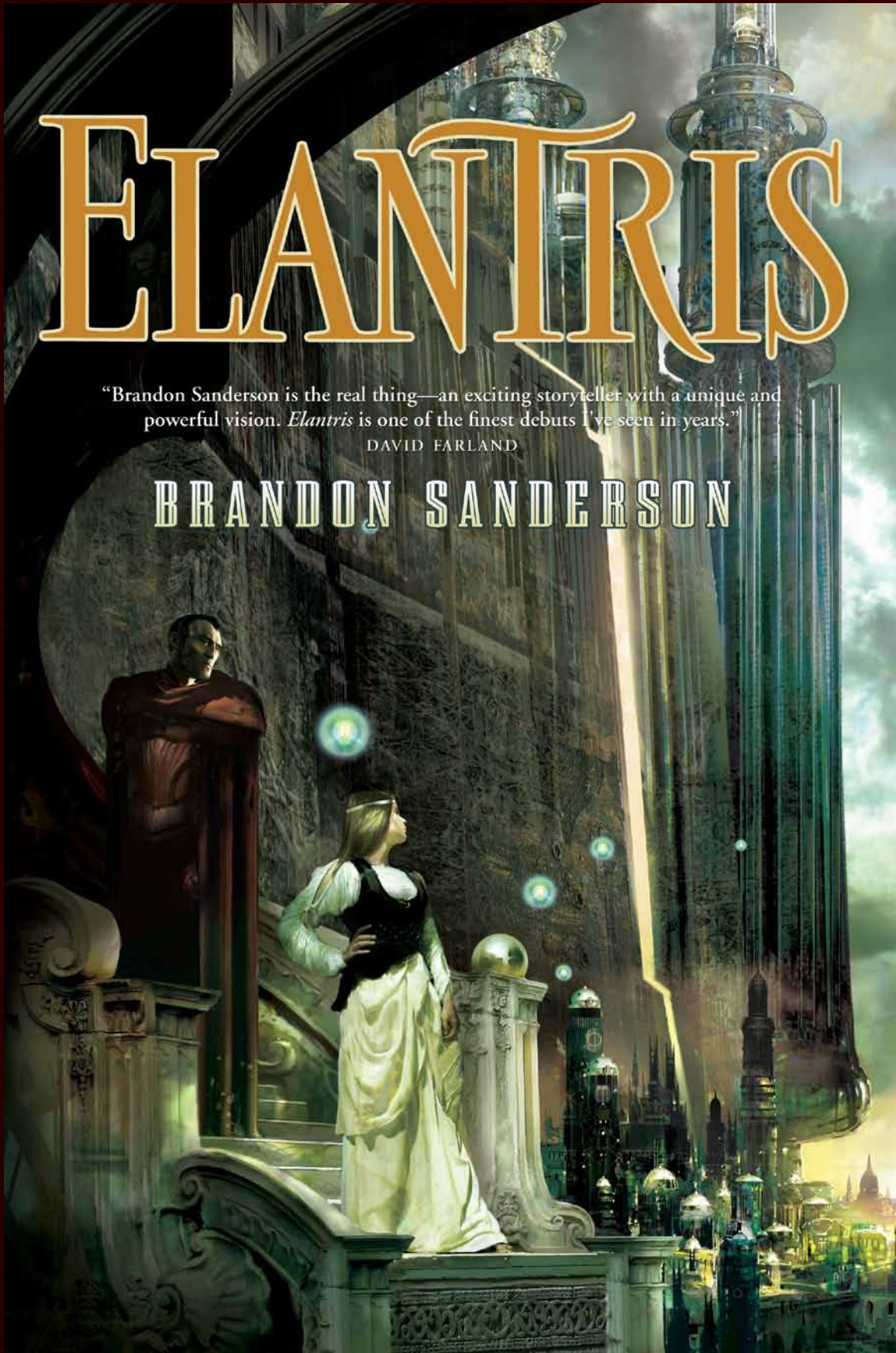
My start as a writer can be traced back to when I was fourteen years old. I was not a very distinguished student, so to speak: Bs and Cs in all my classes. I really didn't have any direction, either; there was nothing I really loved to do. I was also what they call a "reluctant reader." My reading skills were not fantastic, so when I tried reading *Lord of the Rings* for the first time, it was just completely over my head, and I assumed that all fantasy novels were boring. It was a teacher who handed me the very first fantasy novel I ever really finished reading.

ELANTRIS

"Brandon Sanderson is the real thing—an exciting storyteller with a unique and powerful vision. *Elantris* is one of the finest debuts I've seen in years."

DAVID FARLAND

BRANDON SANDERSON



The book was called *Dragonsbane* by Barbara Hambly, and it had this gorgeous Michael Whelan cover on it which immediately caught my eye. I read the book and absolutely fell in love with it. I became an avid reader, mostly of fantasy novels, over the next couple of years. Soon I began to think, “You know, somebody out there is making a living at this, and it seems like it’s something that I would really enjoy doing.” That’s when I found some purpose and direction.

There were certain influences in my life, my mother primarily, who convinced me that being a writer was hard to do, and she was right. It’s one of these jobs where not everybody who tries it actually makes it. She convinced me to go into chemistry during college because I had done well in the sciences all throughout high school, thinking I could write in my spare time and have a real, solid job. It wasn’t terrible advice; I’m just not sure it was the right advice for me at that time. I served a mission and during that time I was very, very pleased to be on another continent, away from chemistry. I really missed writing, though, because I’d been doing it for fun all through that freshman year before I left. I actually started my first novel when I was fifteen, but it didn’t go anywhere. It was rather derivative and all those things that you expect from the majority of novels written by guys in high school. Knowing I could actually produce something, though, gave me some encouragement. Of course I didn’t show it to anybody. I hid it behind the painting in my room because I didn’t want anyone to see the pages I’d printed out and make fun of me.

When I got back from my mission, I thought, “You know what? I’m going to give it a try.” It sounds kind of stupid, but like I said, there are people that get to do this for a living, and I decided that I was never going to be happy unless I gave it a shot. So I changed my major to English because I assumed that’s what you did if you wanted to be a writer. I’ve since learned that that’s not the only way to go about it, but it did work for me. It gave me a much better grounding in the classics. I was able to take some creative writing classes too, as a part of my required credits. I got a job working the graveyard shift at a hotel, which was great for my writing because I was there most weeknights from 11 PM until 7 AM, and the only requirements that they put me to were, “Just don’t fall asleep. Do whatever you want, just don’t fall asleep. We need you awake in case there’s an emergency or if anyone comes in.” I ended up

spending a lot of my time working on novels during those early morning hours, and that’s how I was able to pay for school, attend it full-time, and still have time for writing. I did that for about five years until I eventually decided that I would go back for a master’s degree. It was sort of a way to delay having to make the inevitable decision of what I was really going to do with my life. My backup career then became working as an English professor, partially because I do enjoy teaching, and I enjoy scholarship on the academic level. My parents were worried about me, though. They were afraid that I was going to end up begging for beans on the side of the road, or whatever it is that starving artists do. At least being able to tell them that I was getting a master’s degree was helpful. It was also nice to be part of a community of writers and to be able to see what other people were creating.

How did you get your start as a published author?

By this time, I had already written about twelve or thirteen novels, which I was trying to market for publishing. I was still working the graveyard shift at the hotel, and eventually one of the manuscripts that I’d sent somewhere got me a callback from an editor who had finally looked at my manuscript and wanted to buy it. I actually got the phone call as a voicemail. It was from an editor that I’d sent a book to eighteen months before. By that time I had pretty much given up on it; eighteen months is a lot longer than you expect for them to ever get back to you. You figure, “Okay, it’s either lost or they didn’t like it and just rejected it but forgot to send you a letter.” It’s a funny story, though. The one who gave it to the person who finally contacted me was actually an agent I had met and talked to at a convention. He said to me then, “Oh, you seem so nice,” and later told me that it was because I was such a nice guy that he didn’t want to just reject the book without looking at it. I guess that got me lots of points, because he sat on it for all those eighteen months before he eventually looked at it. But by then all my contact info was wrong, because during the time that I had sent the book out, I had moved and had AOL get rid of my e-mail address because I stopped paying for the service. I had also purchased a cell phone, so my phone number was no longer accurate. So this person, who would later become my editor, had to google me. He found my contact information on my BYU grad student page,

which fortunately I had kept up-to-date, and when he called me, the voicemail said, “Hi, I don’t know if this is the right Brandon Sanderson, but if it is, you sent me a manuscript about eighteen months ago, and I finally started looking at it last night. I got a few hundred pages into it, and I knew I had to call you and make sure it’s still available, because I think I want to buy it.”

I called him back, and then I called the agent that I had met, because it seemed like his editorial style matched mine. He handled the contract negotiations, and I became an author. I quit my graveyard shift job, taught freshman English composition in between to keep me going while we were waiting for the books to actually come out, and fortunately I’ve never had to go and get another real job. I’ve always worried I would have to.

You have many blog posts and podcasts about the writing process and getting published. Could you touch on a few of the core things would-be authors should do?

I would say that the first and most important thing for an author is to learn to write consistently. It’s just so important. A lot of people say they want to be writers but don’t actually write, or they just write here and there. You can’t expect to be a master at something when you first try it. Even if you’re pretty good at it, you’re still not a master. So just write something. Write a book, edit it, start sending it off, and then immediately start writing something else. Give yourself time to learn to love the process and learn to become a professional, because if you really want this, then you need to act like one. The way you do that is you learn to make yourself write. You need to learn how to deal with writer’s block too. It happens to all of us and we all deal with it in different ways, but you have to find what works for you and how to get yourself to produce.

You don’t need to be writing as fast as I did. I just absolutely love the process, and one of my big hang-ups early on was that I wouldn’t edit my books. That’s part of what took me so long. When I’d get done with a book, I’d say, “Yeah, I learned a lot from that; let me see what I can do now,” then I was always excited about the next new idea. I always thought, “Oh the next one’s going to be really good.” But because of that mentality, I never gave the books that I *did* finish the credit or polish work that they deserved. It wasn’t until I learned to start

editing and revising that I got published. The first book I sold, *Elantris*, was actually the one that went through the largest number of revisions. Learn what works for you.

Another big thing I want to mention is that you shouldn’t try to write just toward the market—write toward yourself. Write something that you would love to read. It’s good to be aware of what’s happening in the market and what types of stories are out there and who else is writing books like that so that you can better explain what you’re writing. What you don’t want to do is say to yourself, “Teenage girl vampire romances are selling really well—I’m going to write one of those,” unless you happen to really love writing teenage girl vampire romances. If you write a good book, someone out there will want to read it, and someone will want to buy it and produce it for those people. Not all genres are as viable marketwise as others. But again, you can’t just say, “This sells well, so I’m going to write it,” unless you happen to really like what happens to sell well.

How does your website fit into your work as a writer?

I want to do the things for my readers that I wish I had had as a reader, and the Internet gives us this wonderful opportunity to do them. We really couldn’t connect with readers in the same way before. The other thing is that fantasy is a small-selling genre compared to some others. That may surprise people because it’s so popular, but it’s only popular among readers. It’s not as popular among non-readers. Most people who buy books are buying either romance novels (most often because they buy only those kinds of books or they’re grabbing something as they move through the airport) or they are buying a non-fiction book because it was suggested to them, and it tends to be the only book they buy that year. Because of all this, we fantasy authors depend on loyal readers who buy all of our books. We may have a smaller fan base, but our fans are much more dedicated, much more loyal. If fantasy readers really like an author, they will search out books by that author and read everything that they’ve produced. They will support you. They’ll even buy the books in hardcover if they really like them. Because of things like this, I think it’s appropriate to do a lot of outreach to readers—to give them a lot for their money. I mean, if someone buys one of my books in hardcover, that’s almost thirty bucks they’re spending,

and I feel like I should do whatever I can to make that book the best experience for them possible.

My number one goal is always to write a really fantastic book. But I can give some added value by saying, “Here are chapter-by-chapter annotations,” which are kind of like a director’s commentary on a DVD; or if you’re an aspiring writer yourself, “Here are some drafts so you can see how this book progressed and how I came up with the plot.” All of these are things that I want to do to reward the people who are willing support me and actually go out and find my books. In a lot of ways, I think about it like this: in the past, for an artist to survive, they would have to have a wealthy patron. The patron would financially provide their living so that the artist could create this great art. We do a lot of the same things now, except the patron is the buying public. All the people that read my books are my patrons. It’s because of them that I get to do what I love for a living. I feel indebted to them, and I want to make sure I give them everything to enhance their reading experience.

Your books don’t have overtly Mormon characters in them, but they do contain many recognizable Mormon elements—especially in book three of the Mistborn trilogy, *The Hero of Ages*. How do you feel that your faith has influenced your writing?

Being an author, the story is what is most important to me. Theme and message are really secondary. I don’t go into a book saying, “I’m going to write a book about this.” In other words, I don’t want to preach with my books. What I want to do is have compelling, realistic characters who care about different things. Some care about religion, others don’t. By writing compelling characters who care about issues, I realize that what the characters care about tends to be influenced by what I care about. As for my faith, it is what primarily influences me because it makes me interested in certain topics. For instance, religion does tend to be a theme in my books. Yet if you read *Elantris*, my first published work, the religious figure was the primary antagonist. People have asked me, “Brandon, you’re religious—why are you painting religion so poorly in this book?” And my answer for them is that I’m not painting religion poorly. The misuse of religion is one of the things that scares me the most in life. Someone who is taking faith and twisting it and



manipulating it is doing one of the most purely evil things that someone can do, in my opinion.

With the Mistborn books, I wasn’t ever trying to be overtly LDS. Yet my values shape who I am and what I determine to be important. I then end up having characters who deal with these same things, and I think there are a lot of LDS things going on. But of course I think there are a lot of Buddhist things going on as well. I served my mission in Korea and have a lot of respect for the Buddhist religion. Because of that, I think some elements of Buddhism show up in my writing. Not because I set out to say, “Okay, I’m going to use Buddhism here,” but because it seems to happen when I’m developing a character who cares about something. That’s one of the tricks about being a writer.

One of my main goals is that any time I put a character in whose beliefs are different from mine, I want to make sure that I’m making them

realistic, that I'm painting their ideas and philosophies as accurately as possible. I think it's important for all authors to make their characters actually feel real and not just portray them as talking heads who are there to learn a lesson. Another author, Robert Jordan, once said that he loved it when his books made people ask questions, but that he didn't want to give them the answers—he believed that they should come up with their own. That's what I try to do, too.

You mentioned that one of your most popular series is the Mistborn trilogy. How did those books come about?

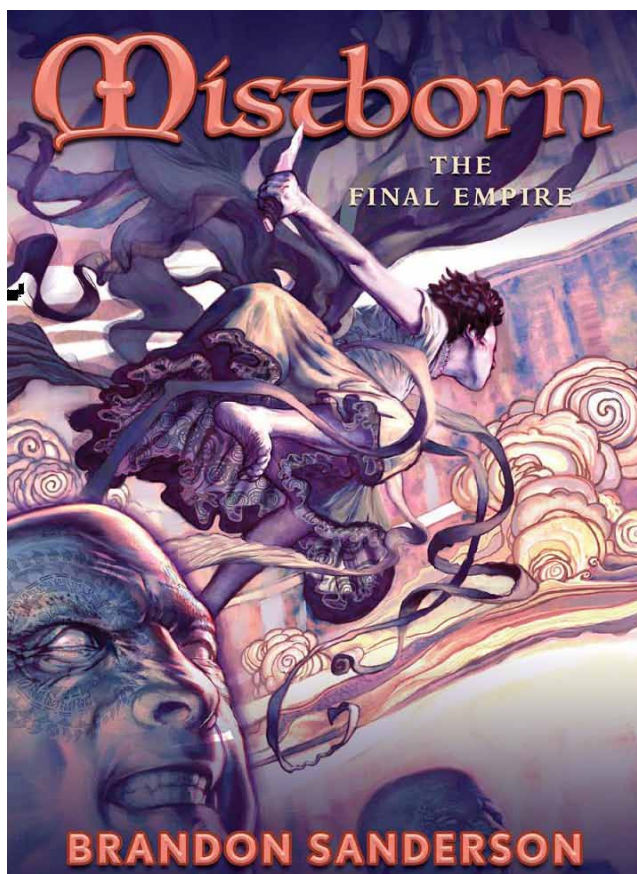
The evolution of a novel is such a complicated, complex, and strange creative process that it's hard to step people through it. I don't think even I can fully comprehend it. But by the time I was writing the Mistborn books, I was in a different situation with my career. I'd sold *Elantris* by that point and the publisher was saying, "We want something else from you." Rather than taking one of the thirteen books that I'd written before, I wanted to write something new.

I wanted to give people my newest and best work. At that point I had time to sit down and ask myself, "What do I want to be the hallmark of my career? What am I going to add to the genre?" I want to write fantasy that takes steps forward and lets me take the genre in some interesting direction. At first I wanted to play with some of the stereotypes of the genre. That's a dangerous thing, though, because, as any deconstructionalist will tell you, when you start playing with stereotypes, you start relying on something that you want to undermine, and that puts you on shaky ground. I was in danger of just becoming

another cliché. A lot of times when people want to twist something in a new way, they don't twist it enough and end up becoming part of the cliché that they were trying to redefine. But I really did want to try this and went forward with it anyway.

A lot of fantasy relies heavily on the Campbellian Monomyth. This is the idea focusing on the hero's journey. Since the early days of fantasy, it's been a big part of the storytelling, and in my opinion it's become a little bit overused. The hero's journey is important as a description of what works in our

minds as people—why we tell the stories we do. But when you take the hero's journey and say, "I'm going to make this a checklist of things I need to do to write a great fantasy novel," your story goes stale. You start to mimic rather than create. Because I'd seen a lot of that, I felt that one of the things I really wanted to do was to try to turn the hero's journey on its head. I had been looking at the *Lord of the Rings* movies and the *Lord of the Rings* books and the *Harry Potter* books, and I felt that because of their popularity and success, a lot of people were going to be using this paradigm even more—the unknown protagonist with a heart of gold and



some noble heritage who goes on a quest to defeat the dark lord. So I thought to myself, "What if the dark lord won? What if Frodo got to the end in *Lord of the Rings* and Sauron said, 'Thanks for bringing my ring back. I really was looking for it,' and then killed him and took over the world? What if book seven of *Harry Potter* was Voldemort defeating Harry and winning?" I didn't feel that this story had ever really been approached in the way I was imagining it, and it became one idea that bounced around in my head for quite a while.

Another idea I had revolved around my love of

the classic heist genre. Whether it's Michael Crichton's *The Great Train Robbery* or the movies *Ocean's Eleven* and *The Italian Job*, there are these great stories that deal with a gang of specialists who are trying to pull off the ultimate heist. This is the kind of feat which requires them to all work together and use their talents. I hadn't ever read a fantasy book that dealt with that idea in a way that satisfied me or that really felt like it got it down. So that bounced in my head for a while as well.

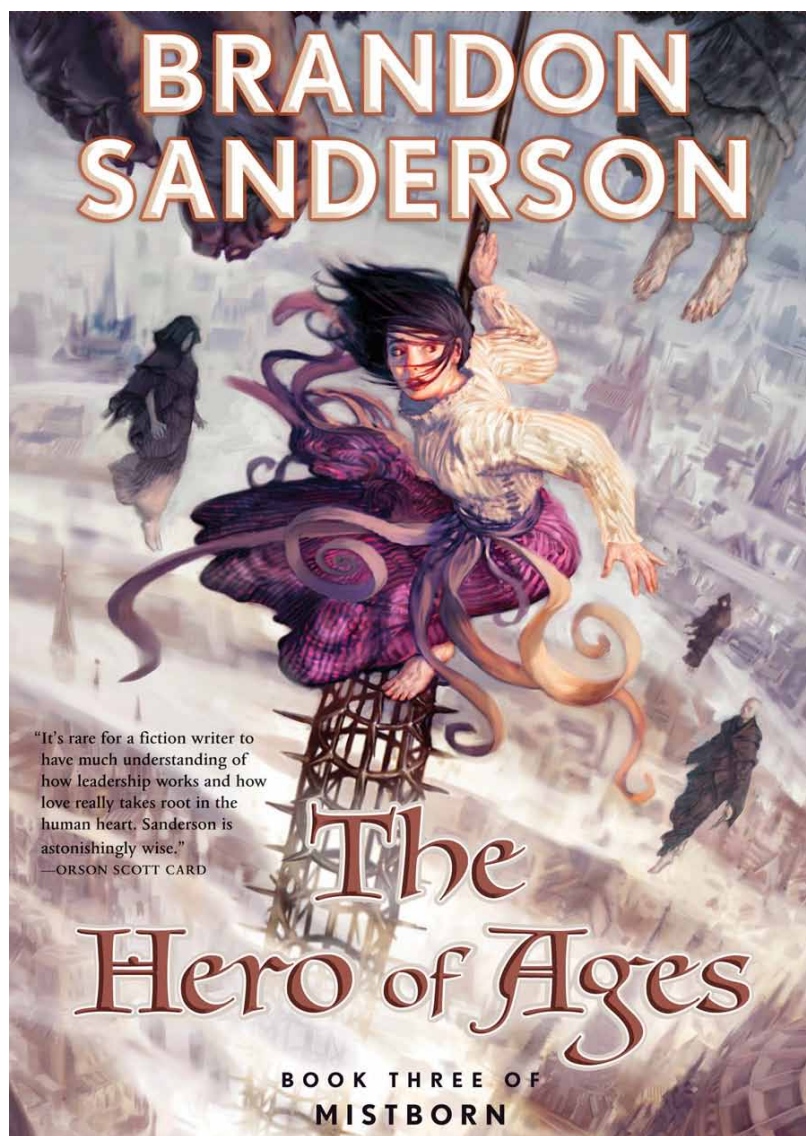
One more of the ideas for the Mistborn series happened when I was driving home to see my mom. She lives in Idaho Falls, and after passing Tremonton on the I-15, I just went through this fog bank driving at seventy miles an hour. Even though my car was actually driving into the fog, it looked like the mist was moving around me instead of me moving through it. It was just this great image that I wrote down in my notebook years before I ended up writing *Mistborn*.

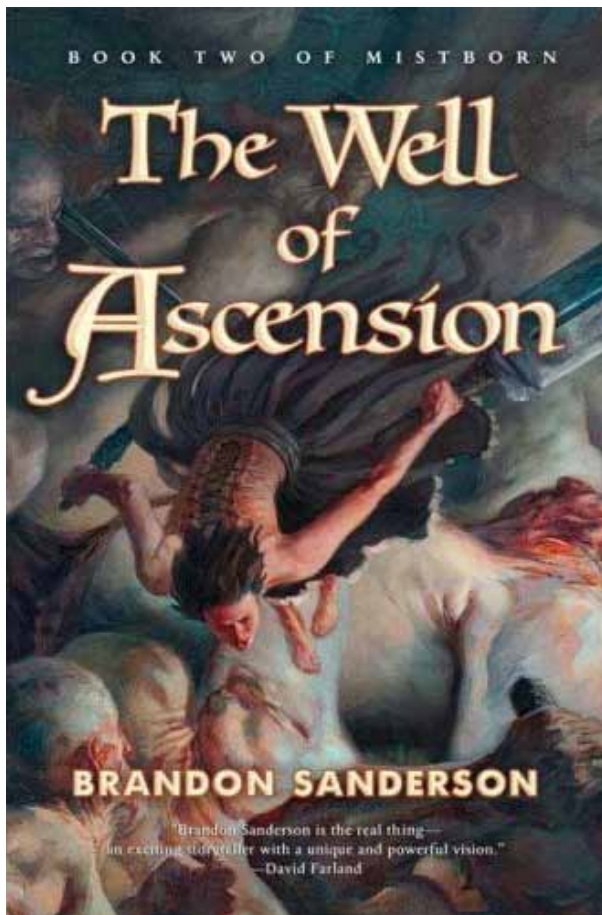
After a while, all these different ideas, like atoms, were bouncing around in my head and eventually started to run together to form molecules (the molecules being the story). Keep in mind, a good book is more than just one good idea. A good book is twelve or thirteen or fourteen great ideas that all play off of each other in ways that create even better ideas. There were my two original ideas—a gang of thieves in a fantasy world, and a story where the dark lord won—that ended up coming together and becoming the same story. Suddenly I had a world where the prophecies were wrong, the hero had failed, and a thousand years later a gang of thieves says, "Well, let's try this our way. Let's rob the dark lord silly and drive his armies away from him. Let's try to overthrow the empire." These are all the seeds of things that make bigger ideas.

After I outlined the book, it turned out to be quite bit longer than I expected, and I then began working through those parts that weren't fully developed yet, changing some things. I ended up downplaying the heist story in the final version of the book, despite the fact that it was a heist novel

in one of my original concepts. But as I was writing it, I felt that if I was going to make it into a trilogy, I needed the story to have more of an epic scope. The heist was still there, and still the important part of the book, but it kind of became the setting for other, bigger things in the story, such as the epic coming-of-age of one of the characters, the interactions between the characters, and dealing with the rise and fall of the empire. But that happens in the process of writing. Sometimes the things that inspire you to begin a story in the first place eventually end up being the ones that are holding it back. Alomancy, the magic system in the book, was a separate idea that came about through these revisions.

I wrote the books in the trilogy straight through. I had the third one rough drafted by the time the first one had to be in its final form so that I could





keep everything consistent and working together the way I wanted it to. I didn't want it to feel like I was just making it up as I went along, which I feel is one of the strengths of the series. I don't know if I'll ever be able to have that opportunity again in a series, but it certainly worked well for the Mistborn books.

Do you plan on writing any other books that feature alomancy?

It's possible. When I write a series, I imagine it in my head as a certain length, and I generally keep to it. But that doesn't mean that I won't revisit the world for new stories. The story of the characters in the Mistborn books is done; the trilogy is finished. If I were going to write more in this world, I would either go forward in time or backward in time, which unfortunately makes it so I'm not as likely to write one. Not that I would be opposed to approaching the Mistborn world in a new way and telling a series of new stories—there were still some holes in alomancy by the end of the books which

were intentionally left there in case I did want to revisit it. So, it's definitely possible. But with *The Wheel of Time* on my plate, I can't promise when or if it will ever happen.

Could you tell us a little bit about *The Wheel of Time*?

Sure. *The Wheel of Time* is a very important series to me as well as to a lot of my generation of fantasy readers. The first book was published in 1990, and it's called *The Eye of the World*. It was one of those books that, in my opinion, took the genre in new directions. It built on what had been done before, but it did new and important things with the storytelling. It became the preeminent epic of my time. When I was a student in high school, *The Wheel of Time* became the best-selling fantasy series and one of my personal favorites, if not my number one favorite. While he was working on the final book of the series, which all of us had been waiting for, for almost twenty years, the author, Robert Jordan, passed away in 2007 from a very rare blood disease. It was one of those tragedies that you can't even describe, and a lot of us didn't know how to react. We knew that he was sick. He'd talked about it. He even mentioned it on his blog, but he always spoke so optimistically about it that we were all sure he was going to beat it. So when he passed away, it was a shock. Like every other fan, one of my first thoughts, besides my concern for his family, was, "Boy, I hope that whoever they give the last book to doesn't screw it up." It was probably a little selfish of us to think this, but we'd been following the series for so long. Lo and behold, about a month later, I woke up one morning and found that I had a voicemail. I listened to it, and it said, "Hello, Brandon Sanderson, this is Harriet McDougal, Robert Jordan's widow. I'd like you to call me back. I've got something I want to talk to you about." It was one of those moments where you are absolutely certain at first that someone is playing a prank on you and then you start to shake nervously at the thought that it might not be a prank.

When I got a hold of her, I found out that she was looking at me as one of the candidates to finish *The Wheel of Time*. I hadn't applied for this or anything like that. These books are a really, really big deal. They are the biggest books that the publisher has, and I was absolutely stunned. It turns out that a number of people had recommended me to her, but

she wanted to make sure I was interested first. She then went and read *Mistborn* before calling me back and asking me if I would do it. This isn't the sort of opportunity that you pass up; you just don't.

I considered Robert Jordan in many ways to be a mentor. I had read a lot of his books when I was trying to decide how to write myself, and he strongly influenced what I produced. I'd never met him, so I didn't know him personally, and that's what dumbfounded me when I got the phone call. After I accepted the offer, Harriet, Robert's two assistants Alan and Maria (who have all been involved with *The Wheel of Time* for a very long time), and I started working on compiling the book. As to be expected, we found big holes in the writing that are now my job to fill—hundreds of thousands of words' worth of things that still need to be written. We've got notes. We've got materials. We've got dictations. We've got all sorts of things. But it's a big, big project.

Are there any other projects that you're currently working on?

Right now I'm working on a children's series. It's a middle-grade series, a genre targeted at ten- to thirteen-year-olds. Even though it's marketed for that age group, I wrote it for anyone to read. It's a more humorous fantasy series about a kid named Alcatraz who discovers that librarians secretly rule the world. He's part of this family whose members all have really silly magical powers that they use to fight the librarians. For example, his grandpa's superpower is the ability to arrive late to appointments. They use these powers in fun and interesting ways to resist the librarians' control of the world. They are very fun books and have actually been optioned by DreamWorks for a movie. We're hoping that it ends up getting made. The website for the series is evillibrarians.com, and it should be going live in just a short period of time. It will feature a blog written by the evil librarians griping about Alcatraz and his family.

I also have a standalone book that will be released this summer called *Warbreaker*. I've posted all of the drafts for it on my website. That way people can download and read it, and then if they like it, they can go out and buy it when it's available. It's coming out in June in hardcover. After that, I'll be working on the final book for the *Wheel of Time* series, and from there I'll be starting a new

multi-volume series called *The Way of Kings*.

Do you ever plan to write any works dealing with Mormon characters?

I've considered it. The thing, though, is that since I tend to write high fantasy, which entails other worlds that are completely unrelated to this one, there haven't been many opportunities to create one. I've been tempted a couple of times, and if I do end up doing it, it would probably be in a science fiction setting or more of an urban fantasy setting. Nothing is ruled out, though, except that I'm pretty soundly involved in the high fantasy epic genre right now. I haven't done it, but who knows if I will?

How do your fans react to your being a member of the Church?

It's hard to say because I think most of my fans don't care one way or the other. The vocal ones send me e-mails, though. Occasionally, I get messages from people who say, "Hey, I'm not a member of your faith, but it's cool that you have one, and thanks for writing, and I appreciate your books." I've also received more than several e-mails from LDS people who are very pleased with the books and happy to see an LDS writer who produces works they can enjoy. Sometimes I have received e-mails from people who are not proponents of the LDS faith who challenge me on my beliefs. I'm a debater, but not an arguer, though, and I think the difference is that as a debater, if I feel that my side has been presented adequately, I'm not going to feel bad if people disagree with me. So when I respond to e-mails like that, I say something along the lines of, "Hey, here's why I believe what I do. Here's what the basis of my faith is. Here's why I believe in this doctrine that you are challenging. You don't have to believe in it. Believe what you want. But this is my reasoning." I think I usually have pretty good logic and every time someone has responded to one of my reply e-mails, it's been positive. Most of the time, the person will send something back that says, "You know what, thanks for not actually getting into an argument. I was kind of in a bad mood when I sent that and thank you for being respectful." I think being respectful will get you much further than getting into arguments will. I have had universally good experiences with people reacting to my LDS faith, even on such charged topics. ■