Dave Wolverton

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How did you become a writer?
I got into writing when I was in high school. I was a big fantasy fan. I had read Lord of the Rings and had started looking for other books that were just as good and couldn’t find any. I realized one day that there weren’t any that were just as good, and so I started making up my own stories.

One day I was telling one of my stories to a coworker (I worked as a meat cutter at night with my parents’ meat company), and he said, “You know, you should take all this stuff and put it in a book.” I thought yeah, that’s the way people do it. They go write books and then they make money. Maybe I can try that. I began writing, bought myself a used typewriter, and began typing away in secret and hiding my manuscripts so no one would be able to read them.

When I turned nineteen, I went to my first writers’ conference at BYU and started getting a little bit more interested. I got into college and I was in pre-med—I always thought I might like to be a doctor who wrote on the side. I signed up for a writing class, and at that point I really got the writing bug and started writing frequently.

With one of my stories that I wrote for that class, my teacher said, “Why don’t you put this in the Ann Doty Fiction Contest?” I put it in and won third place. I figured I spent about eight hours on that and won fifty bucks, so that’s $6.25 an hour. That was better than minimum wage at the time, which was about $3.50. So I decided to try to win first place in a writing contest the next year.

I wrote several short stories, thinking that if I took a shotgun approach, maybe I’d actually win a contest. I wrote six short stories, and I ended up winning first place in all six contests that I entered. One of those was L. Ron Hubbard’s Writers of the Future Contest, which is the world’s largest science fiction and fantasy writing competition. I won grand prize for the year, which gave me about $6,000 in cash and prizes along with a trip to New York and a chance to study with Orson Scott Card, Algis Budrys, and Ted Powers.

We went there, and when I won the grand prize, I had several editors who approached me and asked if I was interested in writing novels. I just happened to have a novel outline ready, and that led to a three-novel contract with Bantam Books within a week or so, and that’s how my career took off. It actually went pretty quickly.

People don’t realize that I was working my tail off for about a year before I did all that, I was trying to cram fifteen years of writing education into a year if I could—that was my goal. I noticed that the average writer takes about seven years from the time they start writing to the time they get published. And I thought, well, that’s because they’re writing a little bit here and there on the weekends, and if they actually sat down and really studied it hard and put their hearts into it maybe they could do it faster. And so that’s what I decided to do.

You studied all that in one year?
Maybe a year and a half. But I was working pretty much fourteen hours a day on my writing.

What was your first published work?
My first published work was a little story called “Charlie and the Wind.” It was a story about emotional emasculation and what it leads to in children. Sort of an initiation story. That was published in Inscape, a little magazine on campus at BYU. I published a couple stories in there. Then I published something in the Leading Edge, and that’s about the time when I started winning contests and broke into science fiction and fantasy.

How does your faith influence your writing and what you choose to write about?
When I first started writing, I was trained by my professors to try to create natural sounding voices (so if
people swear, then you should swear), and I started realizing that I was really not being true to myself. Just because people swear doesn’t mean I need to do it in my writing. I decided after my first novel to sort of back off on that, and I’ve noticed that a lot of other fine bestselling authors do the same—they don’t use any profanity at all.

I also realized that I had a belief in a life after this and in a spiritual side to human nature, and in a lot of mainstream markets you’re not really allowed to talk about that. I realized I wanted to have that in my books. So even though I don’t have anything recognizable as Mormonism in most of my books, there are still people who have a belief in life after this.

But more importantly than that, I find that whenever I’m writing, I start getting into moral dilemmas with my characters. They’re wondering, what’s the right thing to do? How should I handle this problem? And for me, I almost always come upon some insight or some scripture that I hadn’t really thought of before that leads me to figure out how to handle the problem. And so all the sudden I’m finding that my faith is actually defining my stories in ways I hadn’t anticipated. I suspect that most authors go through that but maybe aren’t so conscious of the fact that hey, wow, I was in sacrament meeting and just came up with the end of my novel. That’s the way it almost always works for me.

Can you tell us a little bit about your latest book, *In the Company of Angels*?

My wife’s foster parents were mission presidents up at Sixth Crossing, taking people out on handcart treks. They kept saying “Oh, you should come up here.” Her foster mother kept saying, “Dave, you should write a book about this,” and I’m thinking, oh great, I don’t want to write a book about handcarts. I mean, people have done that—it seems to me like the subject has been done to death.

But we went up and took the family and visited up there and took them on a handcart trek and got all exhausted. I went to bed and I had a dream in which a bunch of the handcart pioneers came to me and asked me to write this book.

Now, you need to understand that almost all of my books come in dreams. I believe that’s the way my subconscious mind says, “Oh, you should do this, Dave.” But in this case, it was just so vivid and so realistic. *On My Way to Paradise* has a battle scene that came straight from a dream. *The Runelords* came to me in a dream at the very first. That’s just sort of my process. But in any case, I thought, okay, I’m going to take a close look at this and see if there is a book that I want to write in it.

I started doing a little bit of research, studying some of the characters and their stories and figuring out how I could put this in the form of a novel so I had a continuous action. Most of what we’ve gotten on the handcart pioneers has been little anecdotes—you know, my family did this, my great-great-grandmother did that. I really wanted to make it a continuous action, and as I started studying it that way, I realized nobody had done it before. Nobody had written that novel. And it was completely different from anything that I had imagined.

I came across a character I really liked, a woman named Eliza Gadd who was the only non-Mormon to ever pull a handcart across the prairies that I could see. She lost her husband, lost a couple of her sons, and ended up going snow-blind. Though she wasn’t a member, after fourteen years of exposure to the Church—as soon as she got to Salt Lake—within a week, she got baptized. I started trying to find out what it was that changed her mind, and I think I finally got it.

She was a nurse before she went, and she went on to be a nurse and a midwife here in Utah—she has the Guinness record for the most live births ever given by a midwife. She was an extremely devoted, humble, wonderful person from all I can tell. I wanted to write about that change, her growth from starting out as this snooty woman crossing the prairies, wearing apparel that’s inappropriate for a handcart trek because she wants to show her status, to showing how she’s humbled by what happens and how it affects her life. That became the heart of the story. And I started looking at Captain Willie, and what a fantastic person he was. I started looking at ways to take two or three major characters and get the story of the crossing through those three points of view—and that’s how I handle it.

It’s about the handcart trek, and the setting is important, but it’s more about the characters than anything else?

It’s one of those stories where I think the theme really took over. The theme had to do with faith, and how faith grows and how you can lose it and how it changes you. This became a really thematically centered novel for me in a lot of ways. It just seemed to me that the characters’ lives unfolded naturally in a way that really lent itself to this novel. I couldn’t have imagined better subject material for a book. And of course it just won the Whitney award for best novel of the year, and I’m quite excited about that.

At the same time, it was a tough novel to write because I’d never written anything like that before. I’d written literary fiction, I’d written science fiction, I’d written fantasy. I’d never tried writing historical fiction, and there was so much research to be done. I drove up to Sixth Crossing to make sure that I got to go through a blizzard and see what that was like. I went along the trail and I read all of the material on the pioneers from their own biographies and autobiographies and company journals. I read several books by historians and went into army records and stuff like that to find out about some of the other things that were going on.

I finally got to the point where I realized I spent about two years doing research and it was time to write the book or I was going to go bankrupt—
I love doing research and I knew that I could spend twenty years doing it and would’ve gotten it a little bit better, but it’s like the saying in Hollywood: “Great movies are never finished, they’re only abandoned.” There gets to be a time when you have to say, “Okay, I’ve done all I can, time to move on.” And that’s kind of where I had to go with this book.

One interesting thing about In the Company of Angels is that it was self-published, and it’s actually doing very well. Can you speak a little bit about what you’ve learned through this self-publishing venture?

Self-publishing is a really dangerous path to take, and I have warned people about it in the past, just because to make money on a book, you have to get distribution. There are some ways where you can self-publish through sites where they do print-on-demand that aren’t going to cost you an arm and a leg to get into it, but you run the risk of spending all of your time trying to promote your own work. As you start looking at that vast fortune in copies of books sitting in your garage, you keep saying, maybe I should go to this fair, maybe I should run an ad—you get to that diminishing returns area really quickly.

Publishers have a great network that they develop over the course of decades or even centuries, of book clubs that want to buy books from them, of bookstores that have accounts with them, of various reviewers and magazines that will help promote your work. That’s what you’re investing in when you get a publisher. You can’t do that yourself, and everybody tries to fool themselves into thinking that they can—that they’ve got some angle that’s going to make them a lot of money. And that’s why there are a hundred thousand self-published books per year and none of them ever become New York Times bestsellers. That very, very rarely happens. One in ten thousand might be able to do that, but those are almost always self-help books. Not novels. It just isn’t done.

Now, things might change. With electronic publishing we might be able to get to the point where we can do that kind of thing, but right now I just don’t see it.

So what would you credit with the success of In the Company of Angels?

Before I went and self-published, I nailed down my distribution line and got it distributed through Deseret Book. So I had a distribution line open to me, and that was really all it came down to. I’d looked into doing it through a couple of other little distributors, but Deseret Book had so much penetration into the LDS market that they were really the best and only choice in my mind. So that helped. Good word of mouth after that. That’s all it comes down to. I got a couple of great reviews online, and the Deseret News had a wonderful review—one of the best I’ve ever had. That helped, too, but I think mainly word of mouth is what has sold the book.

Would you have any advice for any writers who are considering self-publishing or e-publishing?

Don’t do it. Even though I’ve done it, the difference is that I’m a New York Times bestseller. I’ve been an award winner. I’ve got fifty books out. I had something of an audience already. If I had been in the position where I didn’t have an audience and I was a new author, I’d still say don’t do it.

This wasn’t a decision that was guided by any inner wisdom in this particular case. My mother had read the book. She would call up crying every day, saying, “Dave, what have you done to publish this book today?” And I said, “Mother, I just write them. I don’t publish them.” And then she passed away, and the day she passed away, my wife said, “Well, you know, you’re going to get a little bit of money for your inheritance. I want you to take it and publish that book that your mother kept wanting you to publish.” I said, “Okay, I’ll do that, just so long as you realize that we may be throwing all that money down the drain because it’s not a smart move.” That’s the way I felt about it then and it’s the way I feel about it now. I did it, but I did it for sentimental reasons. I accepted that I might lose all of my money, and I was okay with that.

In your Daily Kick newsletters you’ve talked about how debut writers need to try to come in with a big bang at first. That’s your philosophy.

Yes. And see, this is the anti-big-bang thing. This is the smallest bang you could possibly come in with. If you publish on Lulu, an editor will see that on your record and say, “You’re a self-published author. That must mean that nobody likes you.” They’re going to look really skeptically at anything you write thereafter. And if you self-publish four or five novels, you’ve pretty much destroyed your career—at least under that name. If you want to go launch a career you have to go launch it under a different name.

How did your email advice column, the Daily Kick, get started, and what are some results you’ve seen from it?

I started the Daily Kick about three years ago. I was having a lot of people asking me questions—every day I might get four or five questions and I’d write the answers down. I thought, why am I doing all of this work? Half the time these are questions that I’ve already answered a hundred times over. Orson Scott Card doesn’t do this. He has a bunch of articles that he just puts up. I wanted to be able to have a conversation but not have to be answering questions all day, so I said I’m going to just put out an article a day and I’ll actually have to write less advice, and I’ll get it done once. And eventually I’ll take all of these daily kicks, filter them down, rewrite them, and turn it into my book on writing.

I had started a book on writing about ten years ago called Storytelling as a Fine Art. The idea being that most of the time when we take writing classes, we learn about style and tone and voice and all of these things that don’t really sell books very well. If you
look at the very best technical writers, or technical authors in the field, they write beautiful stuff which doesn't sell.

What really does sell are stories by storytellers like John Grisham and Stephenie Meyer. So my thought was let's talk about the art of telling stories—of creating characters, of creating conflicts and settings that are really going to engross people. I had been writing a book on that topic and I thought these daily kicks would be a good way to flesh this all out and finish it off some day.

And now here I am, it's three years later, and I have over a couple thousand pages of daily kicks—more material than could possibly fit in any book on writing. I realized last winter that there were probably about four or five different books on writing or on storytelling in there.

I had someone from South Africa who wrote in and said, “Yeah, I’ve been getting your daily kicks for about three and a half months. I followed your advice on how to write my query letter, and I sent my book off and just got a contract for four hundred thousand dollars.” I thought, wow, that’s a good contract. That must be a good book. I’ve had several people who’ve done that. And in some quarters of the Writers of the Future Contest, I’ve had every single winner write to me and say, “Dave, I’ve been getting your kicks now for months, and I really want to thank you—I just won first, second, or third place in Writers of the Future.” A lot of them have been publishing novels, so it’s really been kind of gratifying—sort of fun to watch your kids go out and do good.

It’s also become an interesting little advertising tool. I have my writing workshops, and I’ve been teaching writing before at BYU. I taught writing with the Writers of the Future Contest, back when I was coordinating judge there, and I’d done a few writing workshops. And now I get people who are asking me to do writing workshops all the time. I was going to teach two writing workshops this year, and I’ve had so many people asking me to do them that I’ll have seven that I’ve done this year, and all of them are full.

What makes your approach to workshopping different from other workshops?

Well, I looked at the material in writing workshops, and most workshops teach the same basic writing skills. They’re the same writing skills that you can get while studying at the university level. You know, how you put together sentences that tell a story that do so grammatically correctly and are beautiful to look upon and a wonder to behold—and we don’t talk very much about storytelling.

We don’t study audience analysis very much. I worked for a little while in Hollywood as a movie producer. I was working with some people who ran a green-lighting boutique where they would look at movies and study them and tell potential investors how much money the movie would make, whether it was a good investment, and how much it was going to cost to make it, etc. I got to working with them a bit, and I began adding a lot of the audience analysis that they had been doing in movies to my own audience analysis in books. I realized this stuff is worth millions of dollars for a potential author. I really believe that—if you do it right.

I had an author call me up last summer and say, “Dave, I know you’ve given talks on how to make money in Hollywood. I don’t have time to look for it right now, but I really need the information. I’ll give you ten thousand dollars to talk to me for the next hour on how to make money in Hollywood.” I said, “Well, I’ll talk to you for an hour for free.” Anyway, we got talking about this afterwards and realized that the difference between being a mid-list author and being a New York Times bestseller isn’t really very big as far as writing skills—it’s knowing how to target your audience that makes a difference.

For several years you taught English 318 at BYU and a lot of really amazing writers have come out of that (Stephenie Meyer, Brandon Sanderson, Dan Wells, etc.). How do you feel that this class in particular has helped to foster LDS writers in Utah and abroad?

First of all, the class has been very good. I went to the 318 class with Doc Smith years ago, and Shayne Bell did, and so a lot of published authors came out of there. None of them has made quite the money that my students are making, but like I said, I’m teaching a different approach. I think that without that class, Mormon writers would be nowhere in the mainstream field.

There would be very few. Orson Scott Card didn’t come from those classes, so you’d have Orson Scott Card and we’d all be wondering how he got there.

Why do you think that?

Look at the number and quality of the authors who all have come out of that. The writers that took that class ended up forming a science fiction club at BYU, they started the BYU symposium, they started Xenobia, a writing workshop group that’s been going now for thirty years. And almost all of the success that has occurred here in the Utah Valley can be traced to that. That 318 class was really where it all started. It became the seedbed for all of the success that has come, and not just in the science fiction and fantasy field.

When I started studying writing thirty years ago, there were really no national writers in the area—very few national writers who you could look to as examples of success or who you could learn anything from. Now much of what I’m teaching in my classes and have been teaching in the last ten or fifteen years is common knowledge in this area, so that Dan Wells and Brandon Sanderson and Brandon Mull and Stephenie Meyer and people like this all have a pretty decent grounding in how to be a professional writer before they ever try to launch a career. And that’s just so helpful.

If you went to Florida and were trying to look for national authors
in Florida so that you could get the same kind of experience, or if you go to Texas or if you go to Australia, you’re not going to get that, anywhere. This is one of the best places in the country to learn to become a writer. You go to BYU symposiums, you go to Conduit—here in Utah Valley you can learn everything that you need to start a very successful professional career.

**Looking back on your career, how do you see your books helping to build the kingdom?**

That’s an interesting question. I’ve talked with people about this a number of times. I was talking to a friend, and we were wondering why is it that it seems like God just wants science fiction readers to be exposed to us, or something. My friend said, “You know, I don’t think it has anything to do with you. I don’t think it has anything to do with science fiction readers. I think that maybe God wants everybody to be exposed to the Church.” This is a little conduit by which science fiction readers get exposed to the Church. That made a lot of sense to me. We should have great LDS football players, we should have great LDS scientists—we need to have people in every field that others can look up to as examples of not only great scholars and creative thinkers, but also just as great people.

I think that a lot of what I do is really subtle. I don’t really write LDS-centered literature. I write moral fiction. I write philosophical fiction. But even when I write that, so much of it is diluted by my own personal thoughts. Any person who’s picking up my books and looking for LDS doctrine in my Runelords novels is going to be sorely disappointed. They’re going to look at it and say, “This isn’t LDS.” And yet, you know, I get people all the time who recognize it as good moral literature.

I recently had a woman who was an Episcopalian priest write to me and say, “I don’t know what religion you are, but I know that you’re a profoundly moral person. I bought a copy of The Runelords for everyone in my congregation and gave it out last Sunday.” And I thought, wow, what a compliment. So you get a lot of people like that. They’re touched by the work, but you really don’t know why.

I had a young man who I met at a book signing a few months back, and he brought out an old copy of a Star Wars book that I had written for young adults, The Rising Force. The cover was completely worn off, it had tape all over it—really, the cover was all tape. His mom said, “Yeah, he reads this every chance he gets. When he sits down at the bus stop, when we’re driving…” I said, “Why do you do that? I’ve got other books you might want to try.” He said, “My mom died when I was eight, and I was really sad, and after a couple of years I started reading this book. I’ve been reading it over and over for a couple of years, and I realized that when I read this book, I’m happy.”

You just don’t realize how profoundly you can affect people who read your work over and over again. I had one guy who had a question say, “You know, I’ve only read your books twenty-two times…” And I said, “Wait, you’ve read my entire series twenty-two times? I didn’t even go through it that many times when I was writing it.” Rather than building the kingdom by trying to preach the gospel, you try to be a good person—try to be a good writer and affect people that way. Sort of like being a good neighbor.