

Juggler in the Wind

by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin

The co-authors interview each other

PAT: In *Juggler in the Wind*, the first part of The Wand Bearer Trilogy, the ancient Greek gods still live in our world, though they have forgotten who they are and have fallen on hard times. You envisioned them as performers in a seedy circus. Why was that?

WIM: To me, a circus is an awfully mythic thing. I think that Joseph Campbell also said so at one time or another. The performances are all about fighting monsters, going on quests, defying death and natural laws, testing mysterious powers, finding out who you really are. Even the clowns are mythic tricksters, adding an element of chaos to the mix.

The basic story of The Wand Bearer Trilogy really hit me when you and I went to see Cirque du Soleil back during the 1980s. Back then, it was a very simple European-style circus, without all the spectacle it's got now. But as I watched it, I kept thinking about how mythic it all was. I was also influenced by a scene in Fellini's movie *The Clowns*, in which a little boy watches with awe as a circus tent is raised. And I started imagining a young boy watching a circus, feeling an uncanny sense of kinship with it, going on his own quest to discover just what that kinship was.

Of course, this story has been brewing for a long time—more than twenty years. It gained new momentum when you and I started working on it together. The story really took solid shape then. It's interesting how that happened.

What's your take on what The Wand Bearer Trilogy is really about?

PAT: In one sense, The Wand Bearer Trilogy is about ancient stories that are still with us today. But not just the stories—the spirit within them.

During the last decade or so, there has been a spate of remarkably bad versions of Greek and Roman myths in movies and on TV. I'm dumbfounded by the way the movie *Troy*, for example, downplayed the gods altogether, when a crucial theme of the original *Iliad* was how deities completely controlled human affairs. I guess gods get in the way of turning the stories into slam-bang action tales. Also gone is any humor, any off-beat human behavior that appeared in the ancient stories.

In other words, filmmakers are trying to force a purely mechanistic consciousness onto a story that was originally told with a sense of supernatural wonder. I think the results have been pretty boring. (Mary Renault managed that trick in her stories about Theseus, but these more recent retellers haven't got her knack for it.)



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WIM: I agree. The Hallmark *Odyssey* and the movie *Troy* are particularly lousy examples. But there's one great exception, which you and I both love, and that's the Coen brothers' movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* It's only loosely based on the story of *The Odyssey*, but it captures a real mythic, Homeric spirit like no other movie I've seen. The Coen brothers aren't afraid of magic, wonder, absurdity, and laughter. Their characters are bigger than life—and I think that makes them all the more lifelike. *O Brother* strikes me as profoundly realistic, with all its wild improbabilities, because it shows what really happens when mortal human beings put their lives on the line, take spectacular risks.

PAT: The characters in *O Brother* throw themselves gleefully into their adventures. We've thrown ourselves into being writers with a similar kind of manic determination.

The characters in our books also tend to throw themselves into adventure. And the kind of risk that our heroes take, the kind of courage they have to summon, goes deeper than mere physical action. It is also internal, spiritual—and it seems to me to be well-represented by the magic inherent in mythological tales.

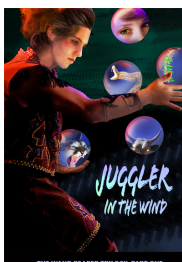
But there are those words again—risk and courage. Why do you suppose they turn up in all our books? After all, you and I are not young adventurers setting out on a quest. What do such words mean in our everyday world?

WIM: When I think of what we're writing about in The Wand Bearer Trilogy, I remember a phrase that Nietzsche often used: "*becoming who you are.*" It's the hardest and riskiest thing in the world to do, but it's also the most rewarding.

I think that maybe all quests are really about the process of becoming who you are. Randy must learn that he isn't just the clutzy bookworm that he seems to be. Johnny Vine must learn that he's not just some over-the-hill lounge lizard but an ancient force of nature. Randy's mother, Fay, learns that she can't escape becoming who she really is in a fog of alcohol and depression.

A lot of wise people have expressed this idea beautifully. Oscar Wilde said that the purpose of life was "the realization of the personality." Thoreau said the most people "lives of quiet desperation"—a desperation that comes from living someone else's life instead of your own. And John Lennon said that "life is what happens when you're making other plans"—in other words, doing everything *but* becoming who you are. It's true that you and I aren't young, but we are adventurers, and we are on a quest—the quest to always *become* something more. That process never ends, because people in a process of transformation always have more becoming to do.

Toward the end of *Faust*, the angels say, "Who ever strives with all his power, we are allowed to save." Striving with oneself, with one's possibilities and potential—that's the quest. Bernard Shaw described heaven as a place where people strive eternally,



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and hell as a place where people escape contentedly into illusion. Charles Ives spoke of the choice “between repose and truth.” I think we find it easy to write about teenage characters, because teenagers often feel that craving to live real lives—to *become*. Too often they lose that craving in adulthood. Maybe you and I are still adolescents at heart. Anyway, I don’t expect that we’ll ever stop questing.



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