



As a child who grew up near a volcano and surrounded by forests, Washington native Shawn Speakman was...perhaps destined to work in the realm of fantasy. Over the course of his career he has worked closely with fantasy master, Terry Brooks. Shawn currently owns the online bookstore the Signed Page and manages websites for several authors. Speakman is a freelance author for Random House. His novel *The Dark Thorn*, dealing with a war beneath the streets of Seattle and a quest to drive out the Tuatha de Dannan, has met with much praise from readers and peers alike. The sequel, *The Everwinter Wraith* is being penned as we speak.

What was it like growing up where you did? Do you think coming from where you have led to your having a deeper respect for nature?

The environment we all grow up in shapes us in ways that are unique. For me, being raised in the wilds of Washington gave me a sense of wonder that I otherwise wouldn't have. Oddly enough, moving to Seattle for college only enhanced that love of nature. I was suddenly surrounded by concrete and foreign smells not altogether pleasant. I will always have one foot in nature even if I live in the city.

Did you always have a love of written word?

I did although I didn't know it at first. One of my high school teachers called me a Renaissance Man when I was younger. He simply meant that I excelled at many different disciplines and he told me at that time I was going to have a hard time finding my path in life because everything interested me. He was right. Writing was definitely one of those subjects I loved, seemed to be good at, but I spent a lot of my energy in the sciences, particularly chemistry once I went to the

University of Washington. Then I read *Sometimes the Magic Works* by Terry Brooks, a book that is part memoir /part writing guide. It helped my writing so much I thought, "You know, I miss writing. I'm going to give this a real shot." I was soon in deep, writing an epic fantasy that I hope will never see the light of day.

Do you remember what your very first favorite book was?

Absolutely! I first fell in love with reading when I read *The Book of Three* by Lloyd Alexander. I read the rest of the *Prydain* books in short order. Then I read *The Sword of Shannara* by Terry Brooks and that book more than any other has shaped my entire life. And will likely continue to shape it now that I work with Terry.

Do you have a favorite story that stands out in your mind above all others?

I was asked this very question a few days ago by another interviewer. For me, it doesn't get better than *The Elfstones of Shannara* by Terry Brooks. I read that book when I was 13 years old and even though almost 25 years have passed, every time I re-read it I have the same visceral response. The book literally brings me to tears with its ending. Every time. It's poignant and sad yet uplifting. The interviewer who also asked me this question has the same reaction to the book. So there is something about that book that is amazing. It's no wonder that Hollywood has purchased the rights to create a live-action adaptation of that book. They know a good thing when they see it. Now if they'd only greenlight it into production!

How did you come to meet and work with Terry Brooks? What is he like as a person?

That's a long story. In short, I was in college taking too many science classes and my creative side was being stifled. It was 1996, the internet was brand new, and I decided to teach myself graphic design, HTML, and learn how to build a website. Rather than creating a website about me -- I'm really not the egoist, honest -- I decided to build a dedication website to my favorite author. Several years later, I approached Terry at a book signing about the website becoming the official site, he took a look at other websites, and gave me the job.

Terry likes to say as he grows older he becomes a greater curmudgeon. That simply isn't true. It's the opposite. Every year that passes, he grows kinder and more giving. He has been a long-time bestselling author with equal success but it hasn't changed him at all. He gives to his friends and family as much as he can. He donates to numerous charities. In the 36 years he's been published, he has adopted about 25 of us. We are all family now. You can imagine what the holidays are like with such a large family! It all begins with Terry and his wife Judine, who love as much as any two people can.

What led you to form the Signed Page?

Once upon a time, when the Terry Brooks website wasn't official, I ran a dedication website. I saw Terry often though at book events and the fans who came to my dedication website knew that. One day, a Terry Brooks fan I didn't know wrote me an email and asked if I could get him a signed book since Terry wasn't touring by him. The light bulb went off. I realized that there

was a need for signed book collectors that I could help. I applied for my Washington State business license and had Terry and Tad Williams as my first two signings. It has grown ever since, and now I welcome several dozen authors every year. They sign for their fans all over the world and I help make that happen. It's a fun business and one I will continue for a long while.

As someone who has battled with cancer what advice would you offer others who might be dealing with similar circumstances? What did you learn from that experience?

Cancer is a difficult thing and it challenges people differently. The only advice I can give is be emotionally strong. That's hard to do when one's body is being literally destroyed with every surgery, every radiation treatment, every chemotherapy treatment. It's our emotional constitution that sees us through such difficult times though, hoping that there are better days ahead. I will say that the first time I had cancer, I embraced the idea that I might not live and that freed me for every day that has come after. If there is one thing I've learned, it's to embrace every day as if it is your last, tell those people you love that you love them, and take every risk that might lead to happiness. Fear has no place in life; let it go and be truly happy.

What do you think is the most important key to maintaining a healthy mind even when the body may be anything but?

The mind and body are tied irrevocably together. They are in symbiosis. Therefore, one must try to take care of both equally. Even though many of us have bodies that are lackluster, we must take care of them the best we can. If we do, we know we are doing everything we can and that leads to mind health. I have had cancer twice now.

When I was diagnosed the second time, I realized I needed to take a close look at my life and discover why I've had two very different cancers. I have made a drastic change. I've cut out most gluten, I've curtailed alcohol consumption, I've been doing hot yoga three times a week and been doing gym work twice a week. I've also pulled away from social media a bit and been better at stopping work for greater balance in life. That balance is key to healthy mind and body.

What inspired you to write Dark Thorn? Were you surprised it has been as well received as it has so far?

Ever since I was young, I've searched for answers. Sometimes those answers are scientific in nature; sometimes those answers are philosophic in nature. I have always been interested in religion and extremism. When 9/11 happened, we all saw the worst in religious extremism come true. But then I saw another extremism rise up in our own country and I was appalled. I know a number of Christians who are just as extreme as the jihadists who attacked the US. That was interesting to me so I decided to ask one simple question: "What if the first Crusades weren't against the Middle East but against very real fey in the British Isles?" Writing for some people is a search for answers and it was that way for me. The Dark Thorn allowed me to examine some questions I had.

And yes, I'm surprised at how well it has been received. Terry isn't. He read an early draft and loved it. But it's different for me. I knew I had written a solid story but I'm surprised at how

well the main character has been received. Richard McAllister is a bastard of a character, a man who is broken and really has no desire to be fixed. Readers have gravitated toward him and I find that interesting. While he is not the most lovable character ever, people see a bit of themselves in him. That coupled with an interesting history to my world with some colorful characters and I think people finish the book satisfied. And that's all we can hope for as readers, right?

Are you excited to bring the world its sequel?

You have no idea! *The Everwinter Wraith* is the continuation of Richard's story. It is set several years after *The Dark Thorn* and is the next step in Richard's life. In many ways, it is a darker story but the characters who surround Richard are just as interesting to write and I'm having a lot of fun with it so far! I hope it will be published in early 2014.

Are there any little known things about you that most people might be surprised to learn?

As a bald man, I'm jealous of Pat Rothfuss's beard! Utterly jealous!

Are there any subjects you have yet to cover in your writing that you would most like to?

Oh, many subjects. While I am analyzing religious extremism in the *Annwn Cycle*, I also have several great ideas for very different stories. One of them deals with angels and demons. And the other deals with nano tech. Excited for both! But Richard McAllister's story comes first.

What was the best advice anyone ever gave you?

Live life as best as you can. We only get one go of it and every minute is precious!

Other than *The Everwinter Wraith*, what other projects are you working on?

The other major project of my life is the short story fantasy anthology, *Unfettered*.

It features some of the best fantasy writers working right now and sales go to alleviating the medical debt I accrued from not having health insurance when I was diagnosed with cancer in 2011. It's one helluva lineup, an anthology all fantasy readers will want. I have finished my own contribution, a short story set in the *Annwn Cycle* universe and set before the events of *The Dark Thorn*.

Anything you'd like to say in closing?

Nothing. We've covered it! (laughs) Thanks for the interview and I hope your readers will try *The Dark Thorn*!