

Wind, Wisdom & Thunder in the Heart

An Interview With James Jennewein & Tom S. Parker

by Victoria Thomas

Lee, wonder, adventure, and freely expressed bodily functions drive *Rune Warriors*, the first book from authors James Jennewein and Tom S. Parker, the Los Angeles-based screenwriting team behind more than 20 motion-picture screenplays, most in the family entertainment genre. The duo draws upon a shared love of storytelling as well as a love of laughter to create this rollicking, big-hearted, coming-of-age tale for preteen readers (ages 8-12), set in ancient Viking times.

The protagonist is a 13-year-old boy named Dane, who evolves into Dane the Defiant. His mission, as set forth by a reading of the runes is to capture wind, wisdom, and thunder in the heart. There's his companion-familiar, a wise raven named Klint. There's his plucky, blonde heartthrob, Astrid, Mistress of the Blade, who happens to be good at throwing axes. There's an amulet in the shape of Thor's hammer. There is the sacred shield of Odin. But lest these elements veer toward the too patently heroic, the derring-do is balanced out by reverence-shattering moments. One such memorable scene is the group-pee over the side of the ship, an inspired move to ward off a menacing swarm of "doomfish" (stingrays) with a collective blast of uric acid. No wonder those Vikings ruled the seas for three centuries.

Jim Jennewein comments, "It's about love. It's about courage. It's about a young Viking boy who goes on a quest to avenge his father's death and save the girl he loves. It's about bloodthirsty Vikings who maim and kill and pillage and plunder and force victims to wear their underwear backwards."

So here's the thing: Most of us never knew that Vikings even wore underwear. Perhaps they didn't really, and it doesn't matter. The academic love of history may sink the tippy vessel of historical fiction, especially if an author's fastidiousness about authenticity outweighs an instinct for pure story. Luckily for all readers, especially younger ones, there is nothing fastidious about *Rune Warriors*. This rigorous, vigorous, modern telling of ancient adventure, complete with body odor, belches, and well-timed flatulence, barrels along with a salty grace that makes the reader glad to know it's only the first of a planned trilogy.

The authors were inspired by reading the Norse sagas, and Jennewein traveled to Norway to visit sacred sites and experience Viking artifacts firsthand. This passion for the past, both real and imagined, allows the authors to integrate what they call "Viking Fun Facts" seamlessly into the good times, referencing just enough Norse mythology and current historical findings about these fierce seafaring folk without crossing into the yawnzone or extra-credit-report geekdom.

Most importantly, Jennewein and Parker never let us forget that the Vikings were bona fide badasses, even by medieval standards. Our contemporary heroic journeyers—Jedi Knights;

Middle Earth ring-seekers; and even slightly fey, eyeliner-wearing pirates of the Caribbean—travel much of this same boy-territory, but *Rune Warriors'* ruggedly Nordic mythscape will send shivers of anticipation down even the most jaded middle-school spine.

True to this legacy, the book delivers plenty of action, physical comedy, and broad humor, reflecting the team's success in creating crowd-pleasing films like *The Flintstones* (Amblin/Universal), *Richie Rich* (Warner Bros.), and *Getting Even With Dad* (MGM), among others.

But *Rune Warriors* also takes us into surprising places, like empathy and ambivalence. There are a few (but not too many) tender moments between father and son, both early on and late in the story (for instance, chapter 23, "The Beginning of the End"). In chapter 12 ("Dane Matches Wits With The Wellmaster"), the protagonist gets a glimpse into the failed marriage of a woebegone troll. We encounter Thrym, an initially terrifying but achingly sweet Frost Giant in chapter 20, "Hearts Grow Heated in a Prison of Ice." Here we also learn that according to Norse myth, Frost Giants were formed from tears of compassion falling from the eyes of the gods. Who knew tough old Odin had a soft side?

And of course, finally, there is rune-blessed romantic love—long-delayed, long-denied—between the hero and his hatchet-wielding honey. However, even the most conservative parent need not fret—this is an entirely chaste tale. While no one in *Rune Warriors* is a cream-filled *krimkake* (Norway's crisp, waffle cone-like rolled cookie), least of all Astrid, the authors do allow their characters a full spectrum of feelings. Dane in particular experiences the highs, lows, self-doubt, and occasional bewilderment that define the process of growing from child to adult, and from regular guy to Valhalla-bound warrior. This development of mature, multidimensional character, flatulent or otherwise, takes the tale out of the realm of cartoon and into classic rite-of-passage storytelling. *The Bloomsbury Review* recently spoke with the authors about their work.

The Bloomsbury Review: *Even though the characters speak in modern teen vernacular at times—early on, Dane tells his father, "Uh, I don't think so"—the structure follows the Joseph Campbell, Jungian heroic-cycle archetype. In the first pages, the young hero finds himself lost in the forest, just like in the opening of The Divine Comedy.*

Jim Jennewein: We've developed literally hundreds of stories for the movies over the years, so yes, we are steeped in heroic archetype traditions. But when we began to write the novel, it was more of an unconscious process. We didn't start out trying to conform to the heroic cycle. We both read the Norse sagas and just sparked to that ancient world.

Tom Parker: Plus we wanted to wear chain mail.

JJ: True. But we developed the story intuitively rather than in a formulaic way. And because we were writing from a really pure storytelling standpoint, of course it takes the shape and the arc of a thousand heroic tales. It's illuminating to discover that, kind of after the fact.

TBR: *As a team, you've enjoyed success writing comedy for the big screen. How was writing humor for the print medium different from comedy screenwriting?*

TP: No movie-star egos.

JJ: Fiction can go much deeper than film, deeper into the minds and hearts of its characters, and we wanted to explore that. We wanted it to be funny but not spoofy—we didn't want to go that far out. The story is very light on its feet, but it retains its character reality and dramatic integrity. Also, in novels, you create images with language; no special-effects-laden movie can compete with the pictures readers build in their own heads.

TP: What we're really after is an experience—we want to create an experience for the reader. This means we have to involve them emotionally. So you have to allow them to keep believing in the character, meaning that the character must display consistency throughout the story. You can't just go for the big yuks if the particular joke or setup makes us feel like the character is just a device for a big, cheesy payoff.

TBR: *As writers, how does the overall experience of writing a book differ from writing for movies?*

TP: When you do movies, the project goes through a lot of hands. There are lots of filters, lots of revisions before your words reach the audience.

JJ: Yes. Too many times when you write a script, the project gets lost in the void. A new executive takes over, or something else in the studio machinery happens, and even though you may have actually sold the screenplay, it dies on the vine and a movie never gets made. This means that maybe five or six people in the world ever read your work! After you've been through the Hollywood spin cycle a few times, you start yearning for an actual readership.

TP: It's true. It's fun hearing an audience respond with laughter to your writing on-screen, but with a book, we feel that your words more or less go right into the reader's mind. This is a greater personal connection for us. Action and adventure drive *RuneWarriors*, but the story also has a contemplative aspect because it is a full-length novel.

JJ: The process of writing and publishing this book has been amazingly satisfying. While this is an action story, still we work within the traditional structure of the novel. This means that we can develop and illustrate the interior life of the characters in a way that a movie cannot. Or, if a movie wants to do this, then that interior life has more to do with the interpretation of the character by the director than the original expression of the novelist. Writing this book made us feel a new intimacy with our audience.

TBR: *At first blush, this is a story for boys. The protagonist is male, and the overall testosterone content is high. Will girls love this book, too?*

JJ: Yes, because girls rule. The female lead, Astrid, is one of the most powerful forces in the book, and that includes Frost Giants, trolls, and all sorts of other magical creatures. The hero's mother also is strong, fair, and wise. Throughout the book, we freely make reference to the fact that women do all of the really difficult and important things in life. Men just do a lot of yelling and farting by comparison.

TP: Another reason that this book will appeal to girls is that girls read. When we've done appearances for *RuneWarriors*, most of the kids who showed up were girls. They love the fact that Astrid is who she is. From talking to these girls, I also think they like the fact that the story line isn't about tea parties and rainbows and unicorns, which is what some people think girls want. Girls crave challenge and adventure.

TBR: *Did you set out to write this as a movie originally?*

JJ: We have always wanted to write a book. This is due in large part to the reasons Tom has given. We wanted more direct contact with the reader, without so many other interpretive layers intervening. In moviemaking, those other interpretive layers happen to be very creative people: actors, directors, cinematographers. But they still distance the finished work from what the author wrote. And when we read the original Norse sagas, we realized how important the music and rhythm of language itself would be to telling the story. I guess we wanted more control of the medium.

TP: We sometimes do add our own sound effects as we write and read it back to each other—probably the influence of working with the legendary animator Chuck Jones.

JJ: I think it's all the coffee.

TBR: *Do you see yourself as reformers, as far as getting kids to read?*

JJ: We're not on that kind of mission, no. What we are committed to is to entertain, enlighten, and inform, in that order. There is no doubt that the Internet, texting, video games, and other new forms of communication have sliced and diced digital content in so many ways that it's reduced the attention span of young people to about three seconds.

TP: But it's also created new forms for telling stories. Look at YouTube.

JJ: The one thing that won't change is that people will always want to get absorbed in other worlds, in the lives of interesting characters, no matter what form it takes.

TP: It's encouraging that libraries are not drawing any do-or-die line in the sand on this. Lots of libraries get kids involved by offering all of the new digital forms. Then in the process, kids discover that reading the book is different from the game version. In some ways, it may be more fun.

JJ: Some people fear that the whole idea of narrative structure is being destroyed by all of the new digital forms, but our experience is that kids love storytelling. So the challenge rests with the writers to create the very best story that they can, something that commands people to read it. In the end, it's all about craft.

TBR: *You are both parents. Was this an influence in writing *RuneWarriors*?*

TP: Well, my daughter is the love of my life.

JJ: Reading to your child is such a gift. My son is 12 now, so I've been reading to him for over a decade, and it's taught me so much. It's almost been a master class in great literature. And reading to our children has definitely helped us write a book that adults will enjoy, too, as they read to their kids.

TP: One of the great things about reading to children is that they ask you to reread their favorite parts over and over. Of course, I make Jim do the same thing. ■