

ANDREW MALONEY INTERVIEW

Family Fiction

<https://www.familyfiction.com/>

Brock Eastman

<https://www.brockeastman.com/>

“*The Master Song* is the closest thing I have yet to find that approaches the magic, depth, and wonder of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The characters are real and believable; the story, though fantastic, never pulls any annoying ‘amazing coincidences.’ What more could you ask from a master storyteller? And this is exactly what we have in Andrew Maloney.”

—Jeffrey D. Shaffer, author, editor, and English professor (Shizuoka University, Japan)

Brock: How did you come up with the idea for this book or series? or What was your inspiration for writing this book or series?

When I was five or six, we lived out in the plains of Texas, and my curfew was when the sky turned super-blue as the sun set. The eastern horizon was twilight indigo fading to the deepest cobalt as the first few twinkling stars appeared; and the lower western horizon was aflame in oranges, reds, purples and pinks with a swathe of almost lime-green separating the sunset from the sky.

I called it Blue Time, and it was always my favorite time of the day. I loved how it wasn't day anymore, but it wasn't quite night either—like a “time-between-times.” When I got a little older and discovered all the folktales about the golden hour—the “brillig” of Lewis Carroll's “Jabberwocky”—I was instantly captivated.

So when I was, I don't know, fourteen maybe, I was sitting in the backseat of our car at Blue Time, reading a new Lawhead series, *The Song of Albion*; and I thought, I'd should write a story about this time-between-times. So I scratched out the first lines then and there: a boy with asthma getting stuck in the Celtic Otherworld with a group of friends. I had ten or fifteen handwritten pages, and scribbled down ideas as often as I could. But it was just random adventures, nothing tied together.

Flash forward twenty-odd years, and by this time, I had added a bunch of wild ideas about Greenmen, Awakened plants and animals, and the Master Song, which represented the seven prime virtues: love, wisdom, valor, might, devotion, kindheartedness, and meekness.

From there, it was simply just telling the complete story.

Brock: Tell us about the main characters? Who are they, what makes them unique.

Epic fantasy almost invariably has a huge cast of characters, which is one of the most fun things about writing the series. It gives me an opportunity to explore dozens of personalities and find a “voice” for each character. Story arcs for each person to show how they change—for better or worse—allow me to develop realistic individuals, who all deal with the same issues we do in real life, only set in a fantastical world.

More than just the world creation or the cool, mythical beasts, I try to focus on each character—their flaws and strengths, the reasons why they are the way they are, and how they would individually react to any given situation. The villains have reasons for being bad, the heroes have reasons for being heroic, and none of the characters are polarized as *all* good or *all* evil. I think it makes for a much more interesting read if the good guys don’t always wear white hats, and the bad guys aren’t always dressed in black cloaks.

Nolan Marten is a thirteen-year-old boy from Boston who struggles with the adolescent insecurities each of us has faced (or are currently facing.) He’s not popular, he’s not a hero; he’s a short, skinny kid with asthma and a breaking voice. His mother is overprotective, and his dad is a little distant from his children. When Nolan enters the Otherworld, he is tested to the limits and has to learn where courage comes from if he wants to be worthy of becoming the protector of the Verse of Valor.

Quinn Taylor is from Wales. Her father is a pastor who was the victim of a scandal that broke up their family, leaving Quinn with a lot of unchecked anger toward her mother. Her grandmother, in her childhood, sought the Verses of the Master Song and has now turned the quest over to her granddaughter. The first novel tells the story of how she became the guardian of the Love Verse, but as the series continues, she realizes operating in selfless love is not always as easy as it sounds.

Stanley Stewart is “the smartest kid in three states,” which pretty much ensures he’ll always be the geek of the pack. As Nolan’s best (and only) friend, he provides a voice of reason for the group, but he’s hampered by an unpleasant home life with parents who just don’t “get” their son. The forthcoming third novel will focus on the quest for the Verse of Wisdom, and Stanley’s discovery that knowledge does not equal wisdom.

Emery Marten is Nolan’s little brother, who is swept up into the Otherworld with him. While there he befriended a giant, talking She-bear who became a man-eater after her cubs were killed by a hunter. The unlikely duo form an inseparable bond, and the fourth novel will share how the two of them come to understand the importance of faith and devotion.

Genevieve Eleanor-Taylor is Quinn's stepsister and the oldest of the group at fifteen, who is universally disliked for being smug and extremely self-important. Dragged into the Otherworld against her will, the only redeeming aspect she found about it was Chadric, the High King's son; but the sixth novel will teach her the importance of meekness, and she may just have a chance at earning a Verse of the Master Song for herself.

Fiorlen is a Sapling, a seven-year-old Coeduine ("coy-DIN-ah," a race of Treepeople, like the mythic Greenmen of European folklore.) Being non-human and immortal, there is often a cultural breakdown between her and the children, but she is fiercely loyal to them and assists them in searching for the Master Song.

Chadric is an Aossí ("es-SHE")—the race of humans called "Fair Folk" who live in the Otherworld—and heir to the High King's crown. Upon discovering a plot by his uncle, Under-King Dubric, to usurp his father's throne, he flees his home, taking his father's celestial sword with him. The final book in the series will recount how he comes to claim the Verse of Might.

Naald Zevóá is an Aossí girl from the Westlands who was Corrupted into a Skinwalker, a shapeshifting hybrid between a human and a hyena. For the past 3,000 years, she has been forced to guard the Verse of Valor. I don't want to give anything away since she's introduced in this book, but the fifth novel is set to center around her quest to regain humanity and the Verse of Kindheartedness.

Brock: Give us one fact about each main character that no one else knows.

Nolan Marten was named Zack Griffin in earlier drafts, and he was more of a "cool" loner than how he actually turned out. He was originally going to be a stoic, Link-from-*The-Legend-of-Zelda* kind of guy, only with asthma.

Quinn Taylor was originally Irish, not Welsh, but I had a friend while living in England who was Welsh, so I changed her nationality. She was the character who was intended to struggle with insecurities, coming from a broken home; but I wanted an extremely strong female co-lead, so I adapted her more toward Nolan's original character sketch. I have attempted to make a fantasy adventure series that appeals to both genders equally.

Stanley Stewart is based on a person I know in real life who really is *that* smart. It's funny, because when the first novel came out, it received an "okay" review that cited "inauthentic dialogue" as one of the detractors. The critic quoted a passage between Stanley and Nolan as an example, but that conversation actually occurred almost word for word between me and the person whom Stanley is fashioned after back in high school. Inauthentic, indeed. *grin*

Nolan's brother is named after one of my favorite bands, Emery. He wears their T-shirts in the novel.

Genevieve is probably my favorite character, even though she's loathed by the rest of the group. I love her acerbic sense of humor and calling things for what they are.

The Treefolk are a highly adapted version of Greenmen, which are prevalent in European mythology. I had never read *The Lord of the Rings* before Fiorlen was created, but when I finally devoured that most amazing series (I know, where had I been, right?), I had to go back in the earliest drafts and make all the Treefolk less "Ent-like," because I wanted them to be distinct from Tolkien's creations, though obviously since he beat me to it by some sixty years, one can't help but draw the parallels.

All of the characters' names have a meaning; they weren't selected at random. Chadric means "mighty defender," because he is.

Naald is my spin on Native American mythology. She is actually an Aossí princess related to another character in the book, Kaliska. It was when Naald was Corrupted that the prophecy mentioned in the novel—and which the children pass off as puerile—was given. But I won't say any more about that now.

Brock: In three sentences (or you can choose three words) what is this book about?

At its heart, *Verse of Valor* is an epic high fantasy adventure story. Though the cast of characters are young adults, I am one of those writers who believe "young adult" does not appeal only to a specific age bracket. Ultimately, the story is about overcoming fear, facing your "giants," and realizing you are more courageous than you give yourself credit for.

Brock: Do you outline the entire book before starting, or do you write as you go and let the characters take control of the story?

Actually, a little of both. I start with a bare bones outline, the events that I know are crucial to the entire story arc across the seven books; but when I start writing, I'm not so beholden to the outline that I don't permit the circumstances or the characters themselves to direct how the story flows. I think having a balance between structured order and creative exploration makes for a more organic, less formulaic, story, while still keeping me from writing eight pages about what the characters ate for lunch.

Brock: How do you believe this story relates to the lives of readers?

I write the stories for the sake of the stories, not to sell a viewpoint or get across an agenda. This series will appeal to secular and Christian audiences alike, though I won't say my personal faith doesn't bleed through onto the pages. I don't think that

would be possible, certainly not in keeping with my conscience, but I have not overtly set out to share a message other than the most well-crafted fantasy tale I can put together.

Still, I believe readers of all ages and all backgrounds can relate to the notions of making the right decision, even if it isn't an easy decision, preferring one another over yourself, team work, sacrifice, and the importance of friends and family.

While the meat of the story is about questing for the Master Song in the middle of a strange, legendary world, the heart of the story is about a group of young adults overcoming their weaknesses to develop their strengths—and the struggle of good overcoming evil, inwardly and in the world at large. I think that relates to everyone.

Brock: What is your favorite genre to write for?

My bread and butter comes from writing Christian nonfiction theology books, and while I believe they are the most important from a particular standpoint, I absolutely love writing fantasy, specifically epic fantasy. My first novel was a superhero story; that was extremely fun to write. I want to try my hand at urban fantasy and alternate history at some point, and I've got an itch to give steampunk a try someday.

Brock: What is the biblical background or basis for the series?

There's a biblical background in the sense of the age-old tale of good versus evil, rooted in Judeo-Christian ethics, and how self sacrifice is the greatest demonstration of love: laying down one's life for their friends. Though it is a fantasy series, I have tried to tread lightly where magic is concerned. I want readers from all religious backgrounds (or lack thereof) to be able to enjoy a tale in the vein of *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, without making magic the primary "character" of the books, as in the case of, say, *Harry Potter*—though that may not be an entirely fair or accurate statement.

God is referenced as the Composer of all the great Songs, and as the series progresses, we will see more of the religious background of the Otherworlders.

Brock: How many books are planned for this series?

Seven books, unless they get so large they have to be split. I *hope* that doesn't happen, but I may have gotten in over my head. Why, oh, why weren't there just three Verses? *laugh*

Brock: Any certain research required for the book, or is it all from your imagination?

Well, I'd like to say "all from my imagination" to make myself sound extremely creative. But there was a lot of "research" in the name of reading dozens and dozens of mythology books from many different cultures. I enjoy paying homage to

those fantastic tales, but hopefully I've added enough of what's floating around in my brain to bring something new to the table.

Brock: How do you strike the right balance in your book? (Romance & Action, Fact & Fiction)

The series is written for ages 12 and up, according to the back cover, but that's not to say it's a "kiddie" series. Nolan and company are thrust into life-threatening situations, facing attacks from enemies and treachery from friends, and they must find real solutions to their problems, where mistakes could cost them their lives. There is pain and loss, victory and elation, and even some PG-13 battle scenes.

The series is full of talking animals and plants (called the Awakened), but there is also a lot of political intrigue, relationship building, and a fair dose of lighthearted humor in the midst of tension. The stories are naturally growing more serious as the characters grow more serious, and for the final book, all bets are off.

But I try to keep a balance between fantasy and real life, drama and comedy, action and adventure, by focusing mostly on the characters and their progression throughout the series. If someone reads my book and says, "Boy, the eight-foot tiger with the giant sword sure was cool, but I loved how Quinn learned to control her mouth," then I think I've done a pretty good job.

Brock: What do your readers think about your latest series?

The response I've received has been overwhelmingly positive, but the fantasy genre is a saturated market, and I'm the new kid on the block. What makes me most excited is to see a reader resonate with a character. I've received e-mails telling me they felt like Nolan or Quinn were going through some of the same issues they were, and it feels awesome to make a connection with someone like that.

But I also like getting e-mails where they think the Mistfolk are "super creepy" or how cool is it that Crannhyn's swords are made out of wood? Yes, they are creepy... and it's very cool.

Brock: How does it feel to have your work published?

I've been able to make a living writing theology books, for which I feel extremely blessed, but I must admit when I heard *Blue Time* was coming out, I was over the moon. To be able to write a fantasy story in this day and age where it seems fantasy authors are crawling out of the woodwork, and to have a publisher think mine was good enough to pay money to put out—that was an incredible moment.

Brock: Why did you choose to focus on a male/female protagonist?

The series focuses on co-leads, Nolan and Quinn. Even when I was first hatching the story two decades ago, I always knew I wanted to have male and female leads. They seem to share the spotlight pretty well, and there is something intriguing to me to have a strong, self-reliant female protagonist and an insecure, fragile male protagonist learning to play to each other's strengths and help overcome each other's weaknesses. It's a great dynamic that I enjoy exploring.

Brock: Are you working on the next book in the series?

Yes, with any luck it should be out by late 2016. (*Addendum: hopefully 2019 I mean to say...*)

Brock: Can you give us a hint at the next book in the series?

The group has to split up to achieve their goals. Stanley, impetuously racing after the Wisdom Verse, may have bitten off more than he can chew. While Nolan's group scramble to catch up with Prince Chadric in the wild, icy Northlands, Stanley and Quinn travel far east to collect the Verse before the twin guardians can dispose of it permanently. King Orbo, in the meantime, has his hands full with a plot of deception and trickery, staged to draw all the Awakened into a civil war against Dubric the Dark. We'll meet the High King of the Hidden Lands, and Whitewood hasn't given up yet. Oh, and I'm sure Cyno will pop up his mangy head as well.

Brock: Do you plot or outline the entire series before you begin writing, or do your books take on lives of their own? Or is there a combination?

There is a combination. The overall story arc across the seven books is set, but I'm always surprised when the current book takes an unexpected twist, and I think I like those more than the outline.

Brock: If your book changed as you wrote it, how is it different than how you originally planned?

The main tale has always remained the same: seven Verses need seven guardians. But as I set about creating the world, and populating it with characters, the story has grown beyond just a group of kids playing weekend warriors out in the woods into something I'm extremely proud of: a living, breathing world that hides just out of sight from ours. Now, as we get to the end of the series, when we start seeing those two worlds collide, that changed significantly from my original plans. I am confident it will be for the better!

Brock: Were any scenes or characters cut from the book? Can you give an example?

Yes, since the original tale was a collection of separate short stories, there are lots of little scenes here and there that didn't make it into the final draft, mostly chockfull

of witty, clever (inauthentic?) dialogue that I can't bear to throw out. There's also a wealth of background information, histories of the languages, the various species of Awakened, and tons of notes concerning the world building, that I may just put together an appendix of sorts some year. A Blue Time 1.5 or Episode 0, maybe. We'll see. I've had readers ask me for "in-between" chapters, which are all the rage in modern fantasy fiction. Like, what *is* the history between Rhydderch and Agenor? I have to focus on the seven novels right now, but who knows what the future holds?

Brock: Is it difficult to be accurate to a biblical perspective or biblical facts when writing fantasy fiction?

To the canonized scriptures, yes. I don't think God ever intended a race of Treebeings to be shepherds over a forest hidden in a "pocket of space" coinciding with natural earth. However, I have tried to keep with the themes and precepts of the Bible, if not the actual facts of the Bible. And who knows, most of these fantastical creatures are antediluvian, so if there were "giants in the land" 5,000 years ago, why couldn't some of them have been giant Treefolk? God is an exceptionally creative God.

Brock: How much leeway do you give yourself between the facts in a real world with a fantasy world?

It wouldn't be called fantasy if there weren't some fantastical elements to the story, but I cannot abide *deus ex machina*, and I try to avoid it like the plague. (Although someone, somewhere, will say I've been guilty of it once or twice, I'm sure.) The characters face real-world situations, but centered in a fantasy world setting. They come up with real-world solutions, but in the context of a world where it's possible to make a squirrel walk on two legs and talk like a human while swinging an appropriately sized battle axe. Where the two worlds collide, I always stick with the factual truth of our world whenever I can, meaning, for example, a twelve-year-old boy would have a very difficult time swinging a broadsword. The children are definitely from our world, and they think like people would think in our world. Every time they meet some truly fantastical element for the first time, they react just how I think you and I would react. Incredulity, then a spot of panic, then an enlargement of their world view to accommodate the new information.

Brock: How do you hope parents will use this book with their kids?

I love to hear when parents are reading *Blue Time* to their kids. Almost without exception, they say they love the series as much as their children. If it brings families closer together, gives a nice bit of entertainment without coming across as preachy, then I'll feel like I've succeeded. But beyond that, there are elements of real world circumstances (fear, inequality, people not always appearing how they seem, social pressures, even concrete elements like bullying and divorce) that I

hope parents will be able to dialogue with their children about, and take something away from the series that helps their own situations a little bit.

Brock: What do you hope kids take away from this book or series?

Even though we all face difficult circumstances in our homes and with the people we meet, and even though each of us struggle in one or more areas of life, we can always choose to make the right decision, even if it's not an easy one. And always, always, love your neighbor as yourself.

Brock: Where do you like to write?

In the living room, in a big overstuffed green chair, with my kids climbing all over me as I type. (Like right now, so forgive any misspellings, please.)

Brock: Are you a full-time or part-time author/writer?

Full-time, and I am thankful to the Lord every day for it. I've worked in the real world long enough to know I don't ever want to do that again.

Brock: How long does it usually take you to write a single book?

Theology books take about six months, fantasy about four months. The fiction is easier because I don't have to research every sentence to make sure it's theologically accurate and sound.

Brock: When did you realize you wanted to become a writer?

I have always wanted to be a writer since I learned to read. There are entire worlds we can jump into whenever we have a spare moment. To be able to create some of my own is a gift I treasure passionately.

Brock: What are some of the strongest influences on your writing?

I come from a long line of writers, way back to my great-great-great... aunts, Phoebe and Alice Cary, back in Edgar Allan Poe days. (He didn't think much of their works.) My uncle, who just recently passed away, wrote probably fifty books; my parents have written a dozen; my great grandmother published poetry and penned many of the hymns for the Nazarene denomination. Each of them has influenced me to write, and I'm extremely thankful to have gotten the "writer's bug" from them.

Brock: What's your view on e-books and the new publishing revolution?

I love it. My first books, fiction and nonfiction, were self-published, and I don't think there's anything in the world wrong with that. It's an extremely cutthroat field to get into, and any means we can dream up to get our books out there, we should take

advantage of. With that being said, I don't think anything will ever replace a good, "old fashioned" bound book. The smell of ink on pages won't ever lose its appeal. I just think printed books will need to budge up to make room for their digital brethren. There's room enough in the world for both.

I anticipate a multimedia reading experience in the very near future, combining e-books with music, animation, artwork and Internet connectivity to instantly research background elements of the subject material. It's an exciting prospect!

Brock: What was your favorite book as a teen or child?

The Count of Monte Cristo by Alexandre Dumas. Probably not your standard "children's fare," but I'm also probably one of the few people who read *War and Peace* and *Moby Dick* as a teenager and truly liked them. I love classic literature, especially Dickens and Dostoyevsky. It's kind of funny how I ended up writing stories about Treepeople and talking roses.

Brock: What is the one author, living or dead, who you would co-write a book with and why?

For nonfiction, the Apostle Paul. Let's face it, the man could write! For fiction, again Dickens. Let's face it, the man could write!

Brock: Describe your feelings when you opened the box and saw the first published copies of your very first book?

Honestly, I was just amazed that the cover was so pretty... and my next thought was, I have to sign two hundred of these?!

Brock: What are your hopes for your future as an author?

I would like my books to be relatively successful. I'm not looking for fame and fortune (that's not altruistic—I need to keep the lights turned on and not go hungry.) But to have a bunch of people read my books—and hopefully like them—I would feel satisfied as an author.

Brock: In what ways does your faith impact how you approach writing?

I believe writing is a gift from the Lord. So every time I sit down to plunk out a few pages, that circulates through my head before I begin. I am just appreciative He allows me to take some of that gift and pour it into writing an entertaining tale that hopefully strikes a chord with fans of the genre.

Brock: Coke or Pepsi?

Pepsi, of course. Does anyone answer Coke?

Brock: Soft shell or Hard Shell tacos?

Soft shell, all the way, as hot as you can make them. Jalapenos are a joke, give me habanero, and now we're eating. We have a *superb* Mexican restaurant in town, one of the best I've ever had. They make these chili-spiced fajita steak tacos with the cilantro and the chopped onions and this orange (not red) hot sauce that must be an angelic gift from heaven. They call them *tacos lloraras*, so good they will make you cry. *sniffle*

Brock: Favorite place to vacation?

Whitefish, Montana. Or else Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Any place where it's not 90 degrees 250 days out of the year.

Brock: Favorite season?

Autumn. The heat finally breaks, there's a crisp breeze carrying the smell of falling leaves and woodsmoke. I can't stand being hot, and I live in Texas where the summer lasts till the end of October. Go figure.

Brock: Do you have a particular drink or food you consume when you write? Like coco, raspberry tea, animal crackers?

Just coffee, black, no cream, no sugar. Oh, and extra sharp cheddar cheese.

Brock: Favorite color?

Purple, a nice, dark royal purple like grape soda.

Brock: What's your favorite holiday memory?

My sons' first Christmas where they were old enough to understand what was going on. The excitement and longing for the day to come; I'll never forget the look in their eyes when they came out of their bedrooms on Christmas morning.

Brock: Do you have a favorite Bible verse?

"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (James 5:16)

Brock: Favorite pasta dish?

Linguini with baby clams in a garlic-butter sauce. Mmm-mmm.

Brock: Do you listen to music while you write? If so what are some examples?

Yes, I do, and the scenes will reflect whichever song happened to be playing at the time. I've already said Emery (and Matt & Toby), but also Aaron Marsh and Copeland; Adam Young, Owl City, Port Blue, and Windsor Airlift; Better Than Ezra; Carinthia; Colin Hay and Men at Work; Eric Nordhoff; Glen Phillips and Toad the Wet Sprocket; James Morrison; Jimmy Eat World; Josh Groban; Robin Mark; Roger Clyne and the Peacemakers; Rivertribe; U2; Unwed Sailor; and Valence (*tee-hee*, that's me.)

Brock: What's your favorite type of food?

Indian cuisine, the hotter the better. Lamb vindaloo with jasmine-and-mushroom rice and a nice garlic naan. *That's* a meal; bring a breath mint.

Brock: Who's the most difficult character to write for?

Crannhyn the Eldest, I would say. He's the oldest living being on the planet and not human, yet he's decided to turn over the Master Song to a group of adolescents. (One could argue not the smartest idea...) He's difficult because it would be sort of like writing for Gabriel the Archangel. How do you capture that correctly? But he's also one of my favorites to write because he has such an amazing history, being more than 6,000 years old, and he's not entirely proud of everything he's ever done—which we're just beginning to explore in the forthcoming novels.