The Dragon Rider in the School Gym

Christopher Paolini was not your average teenage author. For one thing, most teenagers are not authors at all. While other kids his age were worrying about algebra tests and who to sit with at lunch, Christopher was building a world with its own languages, its own history, and a great many dragons.

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He grew up in Montana and was homeschooled by his parents. At 15, he started writing a fantasy novel. He spent about a year completing the first draft, then another year revising it. The book was about a farm boy named Eragon who finds a strange blue stone in the mountains. The stone turns out to be a dragon egg, and things get exciting from there.

There was only one problem: nobody in the publishing world had ever heard of a teenager from Montana.

The Family Business

Christopher's parents read the finished manuscript and liked it a great deal. They also happened to run a small publishing business from their home, called Paolini International.

So the family made a decision. They would publish "Eragon" themselves.

This was very much a family project. Christopher even drew the dragon's eye for the cover. The first printed copies arrived in November 2001.

Of course, printing a book is the easy part. Getting anyone to read it is another matter entirely.

The Costume Tour

The Paolini family spent the next year or so on the road, promoting the book at bookstores, libraries, and schools. Christopher gave more than 135 talks.

And he did not show up in jeans and a T-shirt. For many of those talks, he dressed in a medieval costume.

Picture it. A teenager in medieval clothes, standing in a school gym or a library meeting room, talking about dragons and elves and a farm boy with a sword. It may not have been the most dignified way to sell a book. But kids remembered it, and some of them bought a copy.

It was slow, hard work, one audience at a time. Christopher was selling his book the old-fashioned way, by showing up in person and refusing to be boring.

A Lucky Vacation

Then, in 2002, something wonderful happened, and it happened entirely by chance.

A boy on vacation in Montana picked up a copy of the self-published "Eragon." He loved it immediately. That boy happened to be the stepson of Carl Hiaasen, a bestselling novelist from Florida.

Hiaasen took notice of the book his stepson couldn't stop talking about, and he brought it to the attention of his own publisher, Alfred A. Knopf.

It is hard to imagine a better stroke of luck. Of all the readers in all the bookstores in Montana, one of them had a stepfather with a direct line to a major New York publisher.

The Dragon Takes Flight

Knopf, part of Random House, offered to publish "Eragon." Their edition came out in August 2003 with a brand-new cover, and Christopher's dragon eye was moved inside the book.

It debuted at number three on The New York Times bestseller list. It went on to spend 121 weeks on the Times children's bestseller list. That is more than two years.

Christopher followed it with three more books about Eragon and his dragon, Saphira, which together became the Inheritance Cycle. In December 2006, a movie version of "Eragon" arrived in theaters.

Not bad for a homeschooled kid who started writing as a hobby.

What We Can Learn From a Dragon Rider

It would be easy to say Christopher Paolini simply got lucky, and in a way, he did. The vacation, the stepson, and the famous stepfather all lined up beautifully.

But luck needs something to land on. That boy in Montana could only find "Eragon" because the Paolini family had printed it, carried it around the country, and put it in front of as many readers as they could reach. Every one of those 135 talks was a little lottery ticket. Eventually, one of them paid off.

So if you are waiting for your lucky break, take a page from Christopher. Put your book out where readers can find it. Show up, again and again. And if a medieval costume helps, don't be afraid to wear it.

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