Interview with Lee Denning, SF Author of Monkey Trap
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Lee Denning is the pen name of not one author but two–Denning Powell and his daughter Lee, who apparently make an awesome science fiction writing team. In this interview Powell talks about how they went about writing the first novel in the series, Monkey Trap, as well as other aspects of writing and publishing. The sequel to Monkey Trap, Hiding Hand, is scheduled to be released by Twilight Times Books this August.

When did you decide you wanted to become an author? Do you have another job besides writing?

After 30 years of science and engineering and starting/running a consulting business, I decided to go back to my inner child. Decided I needed a retirement job I could go to naked, so I picked writing. Not being totally wacky, I still do engineering work part-time to pay the bills. My daughter Leanne, poor dear, got sucked into the creative process and we write together, but she works full-time in the psych/marketing area.

Were you an avid reader as a child? What type of books did you enjoy reading?

Read everything from comic books to the Bible (well, a little). The earliest was Edgar Rice Burroughs, his Tarzan and Mars books, and Heinlein/Clark/Asimov was the next phase, I think.

Tell us a bit about your latest book, and what inspired you to write such a story.

I conceived Monkey Trap in 1971 while I was in the Air Force, in a boring staff job at Tan Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon, and actually wrote about 100 pages longhand. Then I got an opportunity to go upcountry with an Army Special Forces unit and life got interesting and I later got busy building a career after the Air Force so I put the thing down for 30 years. In 2001 I dug those 100 pages out of the attic and read them. The writing was crap, and I threw it all out, but the ideas were good: humanity is on the cusp of an evolutionary development that could bring great good or great evil, and a test has to be run to decide whether to let the development progress or pull the plug (i.e., are the human monkeys smart enough to avoid their internal traps?).

How did you and your daughter go about writing the book? Did you take each a subsequent chapter?

Our approach wasn't particularly organized or specified to begin with, but has evolved as we progress…

For Monkey Trap, I'd already structured the story, gotten organized, and was up to about chapter 8 on the actual writing when I happened to mention to Lee what I was doing. She

was in college at the time and got very excited about it. She asked to see what I'd done, and started feeding me ideas, and then really got sucked in and started contributing some writing, and by the end of the story, she'd told about a quarter of the story (I think her grades suffered a bit in her senior year, but I didn't say anything).

What about for your sequel, Hiding Hand?

For Hiding Hand (publication date August 2008), we started that book jointly from scratch, and were much better organized. The sequence was… an email concept/brainstorming effort that we called Table A, followed by an email plotting/character development effort that we called Table B, followed by an email story outline/structure that we called Table C. (Our collaboration is mostly email because she's on the west coast of the US and I'm on the east coast.) Table C was what we actually wrote from — it laid out for each chapter what we needed to accomplish, and described the scenes that had to take place (typically averaging 5 scenes per chapter). Lee wrote a lot of the female character scenes, and I wrote a lot of the male character scenes, although there wasn't any hard dividing line. I mostly did the bad guy mullah Muhammad Zurvan, because — hahahaha — I just really like working with the bad guys; and I mostly did the boy hero Joshua… probably so I could redeem my own misspent youth. Lee mostly did the female good child Eva, because she's a lot closer to the female inner child than I can ever hope to be; and she also did the old Crone Hessa because of the psychological and metaphysical conflictedness of the poor dear. But, we traded scenes back and forth and marked them up, so we both had an almost inseparable involvement in developing each of the characters — I don't think either of us can claim any one character as solely our own. This sort of collaboration probably explains why the characters in Monkey Trap rang true through the story, and hopefully readers will feel the same about the characters in Hiding Hand.
For Splintered Light (now in progress) we followed the same basic Table A/B/C organization, but the Hiding Hand experience taught us that there's no point in getting too directive or overly organized about Table C — once you start the actual writing the story starts to tell itself and you'd best go with the flow. At the scene level (to get back to one of your earlier questions about structured versus stream-of-consciousness) the writing becomes almost all stream-of-consciousness. The structure we'd set up to guide it (i.e., Table C) sometimes works pretty well (maybe 40% of the time), and sometimes not at all (maybe 30%) and sometimes sort of works (the other 30%). We're realistic about this — when the muse beast has the bit in its teeth, you gotta give it free rein. But we never abandon the structure, because it's a good context for the story — it reminds us exactly what to accomplish in each chapter and scene. So if what we wrote doesn't accomplish what we intended — and if we think what we intended is still valid — then we try to reconcile the left-brain and the right-brain differences across the corpus callosum of two people who are quite different in many ways. Somehow that always works, because Lee and I are also quite similar in many ways besides genetic, and because — as they say — love conquers all. To tell the truth, I really don't know quite what to make of the process… but it's a lot of fun…

How would you describe your creative process while writing this book? Was it stream-of-consciousness writing, or did you first write an outline?

I can do stream-of-consciousness for maybe five pages, after that it's hopelessly inefficient — way too much total rework afterwards. Our novels are longish (180,000 words), and with two authors you have to be very structured, otherwise you run off into the weeds pretty quickly. So we structure, and draw diagrams (yeah, anal-retentive, but hell, I'm an engineer), and outline, and re-structure, and consider specifically the point of each chapter and each scene therein and how they feed into the story. It's painful.

From the moment you conceived the idea for the story, to the published book, how long did it take?

About three years for Monkey Trap. In terms of time commitment over those three years? Between Leanne and myself we spent 242 hours structuring, 1305 hours writing, and 2466 hours editing/reworking. Yes… exactly… we now know what not to do. The second novel went more smoothly, and the third is going pretty smoothly too. It's a learning curve…

Describe your working environment.

Small office, all resources at finger-tip reach. Few distractions except the cat demanding an occasional rub.

Are you a disciplined writer?

Totally disciplined as to good intent and sitting down to write. Once seated, though, I tend to fritter time away trying to actually start writing — I do a bunch of meaningless little chores to avoid plunging in. It's like the water's too cold and I have to dunk my tootsies multiple times. Anybody with a mental vaccine for that I'd love a shot of it…

Have you ever suffered from writer's block? What seems to work for unleashing your creativity?

Never had the displeasure, or at least not long enough that I found it problematic. Lucky, I guess.

Technically speaking, what do you have to struggle with the most when writing? How do you tackle it?

Deepening characters by their actions or words (or sometimes lack thereof) rather than using exposition. That requires a fair amount of subtlety and usually multiple re-works.

How was your experience in looking for a publisher? What words of advice would you offer those novice authors who are in search of one?

I dropped the manuscript for Monkey Trap (unagented) on the major sci-fi publishing houses. The general response was thanks, we put it in our slush pile, you may hear from us in a couple of years. So I pulled it back. My advice is to do what I did next — look over all the small houses, see if their niche matches your story, and send it to those (complying with what their submission process is, of course). If there's no interest, consider the self-publishing route.

What type of book promotion seems to work the best for you?

Wish I had a magic bullet for this one. The best approach is to write something really good and then try to get some word-of-mouth buzz going (along with the internet equivalent thereof).

What is(are) your favorite book/author(s)? Why?

Lately… Greg Iles for his varied innovative plots, Lee Childs for his protagonist development, Orson Scott Card for his original ideas.

What is the best writing advice you've ever received?

Same as in life — just be persistent, keep plugging, try to get better.

Do you have a website/blog where readers may learn more about you and your work?

Yep, it's www.monkeytrap.us. It has the first chapter of Monkey Trap, a couple of PowerPoint synopses of the story, and a full-length screenplay (the story was designed from the ground up to be a movie). The first chapter of Hiding Hand also is on the website. No blog as yet, Lee and I currently are trying to figure out the most effective/efficient method.

Do you have another book on the works? Would you like to tell readers about your current or future projects?

Monkey Trap is the first of a trilogy about evolution of a new human species. Book 2 — Hiding Hand — is scheduled for publication in August 2008. Book 3 — Splintered Light — is in draft.

Anything else you'd like to say about yourself or your work?

There's an incredible amount of good writing out there these days in the sci-fi and fantasy genres, much more than 20 or 30 years ago. So it's a tougher market to break into… but on the other hand, the creative process has always been its own reward and one that's worth pursuing.

When you read SF novels today, what are the plots/themes which seem to come up again and again?

Less emphasis on outer space and more on inner space — how the protagonist deals with the challenge, fails, grows, overcomes. Also, I think there's much more of a (blurry) crossover between sci-fi and fantasy… you see it in mystical/spiritual themes that are either explicit to many stories or serve as their underpinnings.

What is the greatest challenge when writing science fiction?

Deepening characters is by far the toughest nut for me to crack. On the science side, it's sometimes difficult to judge how much hard science detail to put into a story to get to that suspension-of-disbelief point where you've got the readers sucked in — too much tech set-up and you lose certain readers, not enough and other readers will get irritated by the lack of plausibility. Lee and I go back and forth on that issue a fair amount.

Thanks for stopping by! It was a pleasure to have you here!