

An Interview with Karl Erickson

By:

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1) Tell us about yourself

I was raised in Yakima, Washington—a valley known for its delicious apples as well as other fruits and vegetables. My wife, Kimberly, and I met at Seattle Pacific University in the fall of 1988 where we happened to attend a New Testament class together. We were married in Dallas, Texas in 1990. After much fruitless searching for that "perfect" church, we converted to the Catholic Church at Easter 2005.

I have written two children's books, *Toupee Mice* and *Tristan's Travels*. Neither of them has been published, but my latter tale is currently under consideration at a Grand Rapids, Michigan publisher.

Besides those unpublished children's books, my articles have appeared in *America*, *The National Catholic Weekly*, *This Rock*, Seattle Pacific University's *Response*, *The Portland Tribune*, and the *Episcopal Church News*.

2) In addition to writing, you have a full time government job. How do you combine both careers? Does your writing career guide you in your job performance or does your job inspire the adventures of your writings?

I try to keep in mind that a job does not necessarily identify or describe who we are. Our livelihood is separate from our identity. I think this is often forgotten in today's culture. Although I am grateful for the blessings my job affords our family, I consider myself better described as a writer than a governmental employee—or bureaucrat. One of the good things about work for the state, though, is the number of interesting people I've met across Oregon in the course of my work.

Working for the government also affords powerful witnessing opportunities. Recently, for example, someone in my agency thought it would be a great idea to use elements of the New Age visualization “philosophy” known as “The Secret” in a leadership training program. I took the time to explain why this belief was not only silly, but also how it was deeply offensive to Christians. After reviewing the validity of my complaint, the curriculum was adjusted to remove any part of “The Secret”. I’m grateful to have been able to do my part and take a stand.

3) Is your goal to become a full time professional writer? Or do you consider writing “just a hobby” to help you keep your sanity?

Well, I'm a bit divided on this. I have witnessed the struggles of those whose livelihoods are solely tied to the arts, and I really like the stability that comes with "regular" employment. On the other hand, I am not doing what I would love to do; I don't always find much fulfillment in my 9-5 job. I suppose that the best answer is that I hope that I am always receptive to God's leading voice, and that I am just taking it a day at a time. If the right circumstance were to present itself, I'd be willing to consider a new career direction. As it is, though, a full-time job does leave quite a bit of time to work on writing projects on the side.

4) From Protestant Evangelical to Roman Catholic Church and the grandson of a retired minister. What life circumstances or scripture passage awaken your desire to convert to the Catholic faith? When your eyes and ears were opened to see and hear the Son of God during the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament, how would you describe for our readers that first closed encounter?

I was raised in Evangelical Protestant churches—what some might label as a "fundamentalist". In fact, my wife and I were both raised in churches of the Wesleyan tradition: Nazarene and Free Methodist. My grandfather, a retired minister from the Christian Missionary Alliance, helped me understand at an early age that we need to be reverent before God, and avoid transforming our services into mere entertainment. Even though our family was Protestant, my mother placed me in a Catholic school. This turned out to be an important influence in the future.

We never intended to become Catholics, but for the first fifteen years, or so, of our marriage we were pretty miserable in regards to finding a church home. We visited church after church—from Free Methodist and Lutheran to Episcopal. In looking back, each church we attended seemed to bring us closer and closer to the Catholic Church. The liturgy and the sacraments began to be more fully understood and valued.

When we began to study Saint Peter, in particular, we were struck with the fact that this first pope of the Church was entrusted by Jesus himself with the keys to bind and loose. That is, real authority was given to this man (and his successors) by Jesus. Christian unity

was also terribly important to us. In particular, we were struck by passages like 1 Corinthians 3:1-23 or John 17:11, which reads...

"I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one."

The writings of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and G.K. Chesterton were also profoundly important in our decision to join the Catholic Church. In Lewis' essay entitled "The Fern-seed and the Elephant", for example, it seemed his words were directed straight at us as we debated whether, or not, to leave the Episcopal Church.

It's impossible for me to read verses such as this and not be struck with the vital importance of Christian unity, since we all are members of the mystical body of Christ I recently concluded an article of mine on unity with these words. "It was Pope John Paul II's tireless ecumenical work that first caught our attention years ago. Slowly, it dawned on my Protestant family that the pope was indeed right.... Whether Protestant or Catholic, we all follow the same Good Shepherd, and it's time this separated family came back to the house of their fathers."

For our conversion story, please visit <http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/2007/0701dr.asp> .

5) You are a diverse writer. Which of the following genre describe you better and why? Children's stories, religious and political essays, or editorials.

At this time, I prefer to describe myself as a children's writer. This, however, might change in the future. I enjoy collaborating with my wife on lighthearted children's tales, and I take a real satisfaction from making children laugh. There seems something missing in today's entertainment aimed at children, and I hope that I can help to raise the bar a bit by creating quality books for kids.

6) You have finished two books and are searching for a publisher. Share with us a little about your two books; *Tristan's Travels*, *Scared Spitless* and *Toupee Mice*. When do you expect to publish these books?

Tristan's Travels, Scared Spitless is about a seagull who is forced to face his fear of flying (and slugs, water, cars, planes, etc). He has to work together with his friends to find a safe way to cross the choppy Columbia River at Astoria, where it empties into the Pacific Ocean. Along the journey, the trio must outwit a persistent panhandling duck, defend itself against a ferocious cat, and rescue a dwarf hamster from its treetop perch (with the help of a raven named Branwen). As I mentioned earlier, this tale is currently under review by a large publisher located in Michigan. I expect to have an update as to its current status within a couple months, or so.

Toupee Mice follows two mice and a rotund dwarf hamster as they try to outwit a new homeowner and his cat in an attempt to make an appearance at a local talent show. The tale even shares a few interesting similarities with Pixar's recent movie ***Ratatouille***. Strangely, the coincidences were striking enough for me to contact Pixar to verify that they had never heard of *Toupee Mice*, and they kindly phoned me to lay any fears to rest. (Years ago, the story had been shared with a friend of the family who worked within the book packaging and entertainment industry. He liked the tale and expressed interest in its status from time to time. I had the impression that he may have spoken to someone about the story before his untimely death in an auto/pedestrian accident on the streets of New York City. I learned that he had a tenancy to try to sell stories before he officially represented the authors, and this was not encouraging!)

For a sneak peek at *Toupee Mice*, I have included a short excerpt below.

“Are you sure this idea of yours is totally safe?” I asked as I gazed nervously down at the living room floor from atop the lofty fireplace mantel. “What if they come back early, Fred, and we don’t find the right hiding spot first? Fiddlesticks warned us--”

“Of course we’re safe, my dear mouse,” Fred interrupted. “Besides, I’m sure they won’t be back for a while yet. We’ll just blend into these incredible works of fine art, these... What are they called again?”

“They’re mouse hummels, like little statues or figurines.”

“Well, this new owner has excellent taste, that’s fer sure. Very lifelike they are. Shame we have to knock some sense into this poor chap.”

At this point, Fred was just extending a curious paw to examine one of the statue’s tails when it instead turned and knocked his paw away, exclaiming, “Excusez moi, s’il vous plaît!”

Fred squeaked and leapt away in a manner most unbecoming for a hero of Super Squirrel’s reputation. It was indeed a real mouse, and he was hiding right beside us atop the somewhat crowded mantle.

“Who are you?” I inquired of the newcomer, who was glaring at Fred and trying to straighten his black wool beret at the same time.

The stranger gave a sidelong glance in Fred’s direction before answering. “Je suis--” He paused a moment before resuming the reply. “Sorry, I forget I am not back in Paris, Texas. I am Pierre, the famous barber and member of the Lonestar Barber Quartet, but why, may I inquire, is your companion dressed-up like a spoiled cat on Christmas morning?”

“I take offense at that remark!” declared an exasperated Fred. “We’re up here spying on the new owner and his feline partner. The mantle was my idea, my plan, so we can

rectify this situation! Ian and I are trying to find a way to disguise ourselves so we can get around this place whenever the need arises—so we can spend less time sneaking around mantles and more time singing bluegrass and dancin’ at talent shows. Anyway, mister pet store mouse, I can’t be seen by anyone except Ian, because my magic cape makes me invisible!”

“But I see you!” Pierre pointed out. “You are right there, “he declared, tweaking Fred’s nose for emphasis.

*Fred turned pale, his eyes glazed over, and he began nibbling on his cape before he caught himself. “Quick, “Fred began,” Ian’s idea is no good. **Get off the mantle!”***

(*Toupee Mice* and *Tristan’s Travels* are the sole property of Karl Bjorn Erickson.)

7) You hired experienced writer and children's editor, Harold Underdown, to help you to fine tune your two books. What qualities from Mr. Underdown prompted you to choose him among the other choices? Where did you find him? How other writers could benefit from the knowledge of someone like him to better their work?

I almost hired a less expensive editor, but I decided that it might be helpful to go with someone who was widely-recognized in the industry. Besides the credentials and experience he brings to bear on his projects, potential publishers recognize that he would not undertake a client whose work failed to meet high standards.

I found Mr. Underdown through his website at <http://www.underdown.org> . If someone is looking for a good children's book editor, I'd strongly recommend contacting Mr. Underdown. He was a pleasure to work with, and his suggestions really improved and streamlined the story and plot. After a certain point, it's hard to edit your own project. You really need an objective viewpoint.

8) Which of your writing do you consider your best piece and why?

I believe that *Tristan's Travels, Scared Spitless* is my best children's book. I invested a great deal of work in creating the strongest tale I could produce. Although Kimberly has only completed two illustrations for the tale, so far, the illustration entitled “Planning the Crossing” is one of her most popular paintings, and it does much to help strengthen the powerful sense of place that pervades this story. As a matter of fact, the north coast of Oregon remains one of my favorite places to visit—especially perhaps when the storms roll in. (If you’d like to view this painting or perhaps purchase cups with this image, visit <http://home.earthlink.net/~kimberlyerickson/id15.html> .)

I believe that my strongest essay continues to be "Mysterious Tools", which was published in the July 3, 2006 issue of *America, The National Catholic Weekly*. It's one of my favorite pieces of writing, because it begins with a personal account of an answer to

prayer concerning my son during an illness where he was experiencing terrible pain in his ears. After speaking to a priest, I was encouraged to write the account and my related observations. It seems to offer the most profound insights into the nature of God and prayer of anything I have written thus far. (The entire article has recently become available online and can be found at http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=4865 .)

9) Your wife, Kimberly, is a professional illustrator. Does she work only with children's illustrations? How can our readers contact her for a quote regarding her illustration business? Does she have a website?

Besides her illustrations, Kimberly practices the ancient art of water gilding, which is the process of applying sheets of nearly pure gold to objects such as frames. She recently completed gilding a fifteen-foot frame for her father's (John Carroll Collier) painting of Christ and Saint Peter for Saint Peter's Catholic Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. The water-gilding process took a year for her to complete, and she is taking some time now to relax and spend more time with the family.

Prospective clients are welcome to contact her at kimberlyerickson@earthlink.net.

10) In your website, I found a link to your Bio published at Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. How can other authors get more exposure by adding their bio at Wikipedia, too? Was it hard? Please share your experience with our readers.

The key to Wikipedia is to first locate where the Bio should be placed within their category listing, then write it up as professionally as possible. Keep it brief and to the point, and be sure to provide supportive documentation (links) for your cited accomplishments. One particular person I know of submitted a carefully written Bio with details of his significant accomplishments, but it was initially deleted because it lacked supportive documentation of any kind. If you won an award, for example, you need to try to find where that is referenced online and provide a link to it. This will greatly improve the chances of having the article accepted. If your Bio is approved, it's a great way to make more people aware of what you have to offer.

11) Are you working on new projects?

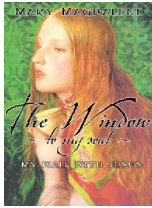
Yes! Besides my children's book and a possible speaking opportunity later in the year, I currently have two or three articles under consideration at several Catholic magazines. I try to keep busy and enjoy writing on a variety of religious issues--especially ones dealing with the divisions between Catholics and Protestants. Working towards Christian unity is incredibly important to us.

12) A word of advice for new authors.

The key is to keep writing as much as you can. Don't be discouraged if it takes a long time to see something in print. Each piece you write will help build you into a stronger writer. Don't rush it!

To fiction writers, I might offer the following. I had the opportunity a year ago, or so, to exchange a few words with children's writer Brian Jacques. He makes a point of avoiding exposure to books or other entertainment forms which are viewed as too similar with his own. I think this is good advice to bear in mind. It helps the new writer retain his distinctive voice and tone--avoiding the possibility of subconsciously intermingling ideas or characters which are not his own. This does not mean that, if we write children's books, we should avoid reading any of our competition, but it does mean taking care to keep our work as fresh and original as possible. Reading also is important, though, and we shouldn't expect to write good fiction if we never have time to read any ourselves.

In conclusion, practice, practice, and practice!



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