

# RED MONOCLE

by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin



## The co-authors interview each other

**PAT:** In the Red Monocle series we're telling stories about telling stories. Why do you suppose we're doing that?

**WIM:** Well, I think we both believe that storytelling is one of the most important things about being human, even about being alive. Just about everything we do begins with a story. When I wake up in the morning, I start telling myself stories about the day ahead. I'll get out of bed, I'll exercise a little, I'll check my email, I'll start the coffeemaker, feed the cat, and so forth. I keep telling stories like that all day long. Little stories guide us through our days. Bigger stories guide us through our lives.

I think we both worry about those bigger stories. Some of them are good for us, some of them are very bad.

**PAT:** In small groups, in communities, and in whole cultures, we've always told grand stories. Those tales reflect what we think is true and what we think is important. In our stories, who do we love and who do we hate? What kind of person can be a hero? What kind of person is usually a villain? What can a hero do to set things straight? Kill? Talk? Teach? Help someone? Take a risk? What goals are worth risking a hero's life? At what point does the hero become too much like the villain?

How can we enjoy our favorite stories and still consider what's good in them and what's troublesome?

**WIM:** That's a good question—and it's very important to Red Monocle. In *The Taker and the Keeper*, the kids step into the legend of King Arthur and try to restore the code of chivalry, which has just about disappeared. But is chivalry a good thing or a bad thing? Our character Yola realizes why you have to think about that. On the one hand, such stories inspire us all to be honest and courteous, to take care of the weak, and to dream great dreams. On the other hand, chivalric stories don't offer women many opportunities for independence. Women usually just sit around listening to poetry—or waiting to get rescued.

So we have to look at our old stories closely, understanding how they affect us in good and bad ways. But what about our new stories—the ones we get from our songs, movies, TV shows, novels, and such? Where do they lead us?

**PAT:** I think the same questions apply. What do today's popular stories tell us about what's good and what's evil? About how heroes behave? About who heroes are? Some things don't change much. The story is usually about the most physically appealing characters. The beautiful woman is loved and must be saved from danger at any cost—sometimes only because she is beautiful. Today, women do get to be action heroes who are perfectly



capable of rescuing themselves and others too—but they often have to do all that wearing spike heels and showing a lot of bare skin. And in today’s movies, any guy who takes off his shirt had better be spending most of his life in a gym.

One reason I love *The Lord of the Rings* is that Tolkien makes us rethink some of our stereotypes: even the traditional hero-types must work as a team; the spiritually strongest are the physically weakest; and the failed former ringbearer is absolutely essential to success.

In those powerful mini-stories called advertising (and also in some music videos), appearance is what matters—appearing successful, talented, accomplished. Maybe that’s also why there’s this tidal wave of ghostwriting going on now, and not just for term papers.

But what about our more “serious” literature and films? And what is a serious story anyhow?

**WIM:** Sometimes I think that critics automatically give “points” for certain serious themes. A novel might get a good six points just for being about a dysfunctional family. I really do sense this in reviews I read. “The book isn’t especially well written, and it doesn’t say anything new,” critics seem to be saying, “but it is about a dysfunctional family!” And if you add a lingering, fatal disease to a story about a dysfunctional family, well, the book gets a perfect rating of ten out of ten. It will certainly win the Pulitzer. Whether the story is of any real value to human beings doesn’t matter—much less its quality.

This mentality has even crept into the kinds of kids’ novels that get major book awards. Parents, educators, critics, and award committees push dreary novels about the hopelessness of the human condition onto kids—and kids don’t like it much.

You sometimes describe us as having “lowbrow” taste. Indeed, we do like those funny *Charlie’s Angels* movies. I actually think we’re neither “lowbrow” nor “highbrow” but just plain “brow.” We look for good stories anywhere they might turn up. We both agree that the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* deserved its enormous popularity. We were great fans, and we were sorry it went off the air. Of course, it wasn’t “serious” like certain other prestigious shows, because it dealt with vampires and demons and such, not with organized crime and women’s shoes, so it didn’t garner many awards. But young people rightly saw through the “seriousness” mystique and fell in love with it. Buffy is right up there with *Huck Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye* as one of the great sagas of growing up in America. Surely every high school girl who ever had a boyfriend has felt the need to send him to hell for a hundred years. That kind of thing is just plain true. So are themes like living up to your potential, standing by your friends, taking responsibility for everything you do, and learning who you really are.

**PAT:** That’s the kind of thing that kids are faced with in all of our novels for young readers.

