

The dragon clicks

A young author strikes gold with fantasy tales BY MICHAEL GILTZ

The new fantasy film "Eragon" — the story of a young man who bonds with a dragon to fight evil — opened as the No. 1 movie around the world, grossing some \$53 million. (That includes the better-than-expected \$23 million it grossed in the U.S., right behind Will Smith's "The Pursuit of Happyness.")

For the book's young author, Christopher Paolini, it's the latest jaw-dropping moment in his unlikely career.

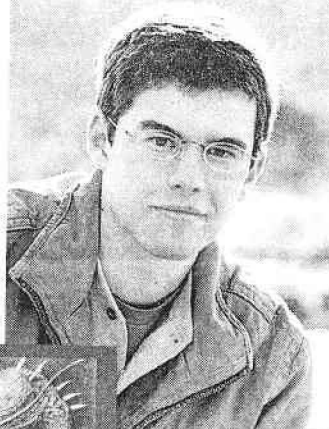
"My sister and I have been traveling around the country," says Paolini, who's now 23. "And everywhere we go we're seeing 'Eragon' billboards and posters and previews on television. There's a fire-breathing dragon billboard in L.A.! We don't see this stuff in Montana because there aren't a lot of people in Montana. There aren't a lot of billboards because the bison don't go to the movies."

Though he's young, Paolini is a fantasy veteran. Home-schooled, he was ready for college at age 15. But his parents decided Paolini should wait until he was older.

Suddenly, with time on his hands, Paolini famously mapped out a fantasy trilogy and began writing. When he was done with the first book, the family decided to self-publish it and tour the country to promote the work. Best-selling author Carl Hiaasen ("Striptease," "Skinny Dip," "Nature Girl") got wind of their success, read the book and pushed his publisher to snap up the title. The result? Two best sellers: "Eragon" and its sequel, "Eldest," with more than 1 million copies in print — and a third book on the way.

Since Paolini always imagined his tale as a movie (he was going to write a script before it became a novel), seeing his story on the big screen with actors like Jeremy Irons and newcomer Edward Speleers as Eragon seems amazing. What surprised him most about the movie?

"Just the fact that it was a movie," he laughs. "There were times in the film



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Christopher Paolini, born in California and raised in Montana, wrote "Eragon" when he was 17. The new movie (top) is a hit.

when characters would do a line of dialogue right out of the book and it was a déjà vu, and it was a 'Twilight Zone'-sort of moment."

College has been delayed for now, since Paolini has found his calling. After he finishes the final book in the trilogy, he's bursting with ideas for novels in all sorts of genres, including historical fiction, romance, detective novels, you name it. Since he started at 15, Paolini has devoted more than a third of his entire life (eight years and counting) to the trilogy.

But already, even younger authors are nipping at his heels. He was delighted to hear that a girl in the U.K. is publishing her first fantasy book at only 13 years of age. So as the grand old man of young fantasy authors, when is he going to finish the final book?

"I do want to finish it as soon as possible," says Paolini. But apparently he's been struck by J.K. Rowling syndrome, because, he says, he's realized, "It just keeps getting bigger!" ♦