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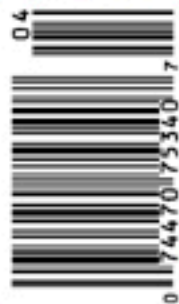
Alien Objects

An Interview With the Oscar®-Winning
Creator of *The Last Thing*

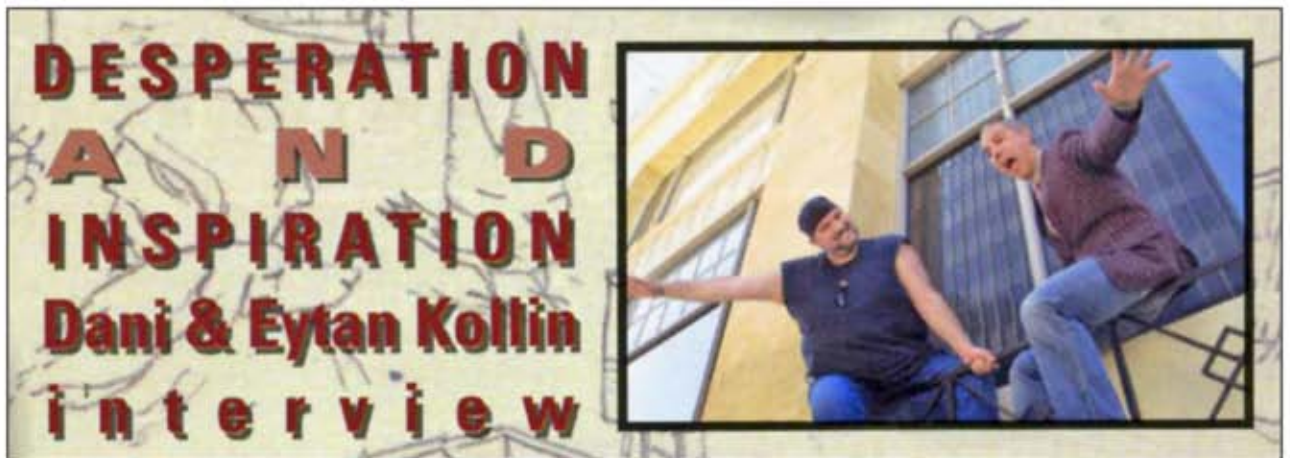
SHAUN TAN

World Fantasy Judges Announced
Spectrum Award Winners
Prometheus Hall of Fame
Award Finalists

DESPERATION
AND
INSPIRATION
Dani & Eytan Kollin
interview



Us, Zoomed!





Eytan Kollin (left) & Dani Kollin (right)

DESPERATION AND *Inspiration* DANI & EYTAN KOLLIN

Dani Kollin was born June 25, 1964 – “George Orwell’s birthday” – on an Air Force base in Ankara, Turkey, where his father was stationed. He moved to the States when he was three weeks old. He attended UCLA, graduating with a degree in graphic design and communications, and later worked as a graphic designer and eventually as a copywriter.

His brother Eytan Kollin was born February 2, 1967 – “Ayn Rand’s birthday” – in Spokane WA. He got a BA in 1991 and a teaching credential for history in 1999, and has taught high school.

The family moved frequently, and they grew up in Washington state, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, and California.

Their debut novel, *The Unincorporated Man* (2009) won the 2010 Prometheus Award for best science fiction novel of the year from the Libertarian Futurist Society. Sequel *The Unincorporated War* appeared in 2010, and third volume *The Unincorporated Woman* is forthcoming in August 2011. A fourth volume is expected to conclude the series.

Dani has been happily married to the same woman for 20 years, and has twin 10-year-old boys and a 13-year-old daughter. He’s an avid endurance cyclist and surfer. Eytan is single and his hobbies include melee weapons and knitting.

Dani Kollin: “Eytan didn’t speak till he was five. Our parents were freaked out.”

Eytan Kollin: “I remember not speaking. I remember all the big people around me being upset about it while I was nonchalant. I didn’t need to talk. I had an older brother and older sister who understood everything I needed, a big plushy play animal, and food; why did I need words? When other people were talking, I understood what I needed to.

“I didn’t read a word till I was eight – that really freaked them out! The school system completely failed. My sister taught me to read, with the nightmarish application of a ruler and the ‘See Dick and Jane’ book. To this day, Stephen King and V.C. Andrews don’t scare me at all, but ‘The ball, the big red ball, the big red bouncing ball’ scares the living shit out of me.”

DK: “Because Eytan didn’t speak until later and didn’t start writing and all of that, within the social circles of schools he was marginalized. Because of that, he would just go to the

library and read. He spent years, much earlier than most kids would, in a library, filling his head with information: reading and reading and reading...”

EK: “I thought for sure I’d be dead at 33. I didn’t go to the dentist, didn’t have retirement funds, didn’t save for anything. But at 33, I had to change my plan.”

DK: “He had always been writing, and I was his biggest cheerleader. I’d become a copywriter, and he would show me stuff and I’d be like, ‘Dude, these are great ideas! Why don’t you do something with it?’”

EK: “I love teaching, but the bureaucracy so often gets in the way of the job that it tends to make me miserable.”

DK: “So he would send me this stuff every now and then – a few pages here, a short-story there, and it was always great. I kept telling him, ‘Stop being miserable at what you’re doing. Be a writer!’ He would never do it, but that was the seed of how we started writing together.”

EK: “People talk about inspiration, but what really matters is *desperation*. Fear of well-deserved anonymity; that’s what drives so many of us to action. I had just come off a divorce, I was living with my parents, didn’t have a job. If I’d had a garage to live in, I would have hit the perfect trifecta of failure in the United States. At bar mitzvahs and weddings, I was being put at the table with people in their 30s who live with their parents. I took a look around and I was like, ‘Oh. Loser.’ I went to Dani and said, ‘Do you want to write a book?’ He said no. But Dani had some of his own issues.”

DK: “It was only when we were both broke and desperate that we decided, ‘Hey, let’s do the whole Reese’s peanut butter cup thing: chocolate and peanut butter.’ I had moved back from the Middle East at another down time in the economy, couldn’t find a job at any ad agency, and ended up living with my *in-laws* and three kids. So I had nothing to do while I was looking for work, and I said, ‘Let me take a look at some of these ideas, because you’re not doing anything on your own.’ (Eytan is the great *unmotivator* – it’s like moving a mountain to get him to do anything – but I am very anal-retentive.) So he gave me a whole folder of ideas. *The Unincorporated Man* was one of them, just amazing! It was like a ten-page treatment. So I said, ‘Let’s outline it.’”

EK: “Mind you, at this point we haven’t had any writing courses, we haven’t taken any an-

nexes. No short stories. We just decided, ‘What the heck? Let’s write a novel.’ And it was sci-fi-cé fiction.”

DK: “Eytan had submerged himself into sci-fi with *Doctor Who*: the comics, the books. He had never gotten involved with fandom in any realistic way. I was an advertising copywriter who just wanted to write with Eytan, who watched some science fiction every now and then and read a few science fiction books. That was the scope of my background, up until a few years ago. And I think that *not* having been involved and then working with Eytan (who was deeply into SF but not of it), we probably produced something unique.”

EK: “The initial idea came out of my job. I had been teaching in Compton: East LA, the ghetto, the slums of the slums, a lot of social dis cohesion. We had lockdowns on campus because there were gangs outside. But these kids I was teaching were sharp. We’d play chess, and if I wasn’t watching the board they’d beat me. I did the stock game, and I had a kid who understood the market. He just had that feel: he was able to pick stocks. But he had to have somebody read the page to him, because he was not numerate or literate. This guy, if he had been given a decent education, would have started out in the mail room of Charles Schwab or Merrill Lynch, and within ten years would have had an office – within 15 years, a corner office. But it was useless. His education had been stolen by the state.

“So I was thinking, could we develop a system where these potentials are maximized? We have one and it’s called capitalism, but no one has *really* tried it. People always tinker with it. What if you created a capitalist system that was truly capitalist?”

DK: “As opposed to corporate socialism.”

EK: “As opposed to the regulatory state. The great problem with capitalism is that it is completely amoral. It will kill you, me, her, *anybody*, in a heartbeat. It will run kiddie porn through every orifice of the Internet, if there’s a dollar to be made from it. How do you solve that problem? Then I realized the answer is relatively simple: if you make people the *profit*, capitalism will work just as hard for people. And the simplest way to do that is to incorporate the individual. The human becomes the corporation, not the corporation getting human attributes.

"I honestly believe that capitalism – unfettered – is the best thing for humanity, but if you truly achieved it humanity would find some way to screw it up. People want power, dominion, to impose their will on others. We're inventive, creative, kind, generous. We're busybodies, we're demanding, we're sure that we're right and the other person is wrong. We want to impose our beliefs. So no matter what system you have, eventually it will fall apart."

DK: "Part of what was wonderful about creating the world was creating a perfect system. We assumed the Singularity. We assumed that medical technology had come to a point where people were living expanded lifetimes or unlimited lifespans, where everybody pretty much had what they wanted. If you could create the perfected system, and throw your science in to boot, is there a way that you could jimmy that? How would you screw it up? Lust for power."

EK: "If you have enough to eat, if you can get an education, if you have a great place to stay, then you will be able to have a couple of jobs that you will be pretty good at and enjoy doing. This system isn't going to put you in a job you hate unless it compensates you extremely well. It's easier to give you a lower-paying job and put you into something you don't mind doing. If you die at a young age and I own shares in you, that's bad. I will make sure that you get health care not because I love you, not because I like you. If I own shares in you, all of a sudden your well-being becomes paramount to me."

"We're all about equality of opportunity. Equality of *outcome* is not only dangerous but impossible. Equality of opportunity is 'the state will get out of your way.' It's not going to help you, but it's not going to do anything to harm you. There are just the legal minimums that you don't harm somebody else."

DK: "The reason for the book was to have a sort of debate as to what the true nature of freedom is. When our contrarian character from the past comes out and says, 'Selling shares in yourselves is slavery,' they say, 'But look at the age you were living in. You were paying 40% taxes, and what were you getting for it? At least here, for using a percentage of ourselves, we get something that we can hold in our hands or that we can look to.'"

"The connection of our birthdays to Ayn Rand and George Orwell is kind of neat, because both are in the book. I like Ayn Rand's philosophies, but where I don't like Rand is where I feel that the philosophy becomes more important than the story itself. I have a hard time with the 64-page monologues! Eytan tended to take the big speeches in the book, since those aren't my favorite things to write. Despite that, I want to write stories that I feel have a moral dimension or a strong sociological message, because that's where I feel passionate. Eytan wants to write good old-fashioned action-adventure stories; I don't. We've had a lot of arguments. But ultimately, it was paramount that the story be *uber alles*, and then the philosophy run through it. This is how Eytan and I write, and it is one of the reasons that this idea really spoke to me."

EK: "Everything belongs to one project. In

the first book, it mainly deals with economic questions. The second book is a military one, and the third – which got so long we had to split it in two – is a core philosophical one. Maybe what you have is worth fighting for, but how many people are you willing to kill for it?"

DK: "At what point are you a terrorist and at what point are you a freedom fighter? It's a very important question. And just how bad is it, if you give away small percentages of your freedom? I've lived in Israel, where it was *de rigueur* to have yourself patted down, your shoes taken off and your bags checked, before going into a store. That was just standard, because that was the world we lived in. Is freedom a value that we're allowing to slip away, that is far more precious than we realize? These are the kind of questions that we want answered on a big level – through the action, through the story."

"We work in the fact that the Middle East blew itself up in some kind of crazy religious war. Religion, at the time that our protagonist arrives, isn't mentioned in the book. But in book two, **The Unincorporated War**, when people start dying what we call a 'permanent death,' others start asking some of those questions that hadn't been asked in hundreds of years, especially, 'What happens when you die?' So we begin to explore what would happen if the big religions make a comeback 300 years after they've been relegated to the dustbins of history. How would that, how *could* that, be controlled? And how are freedom and religion linked? (We don't necessarily answer the question, but we ask the question.)"

"We're getting reaction to **The Unincorporated Man**, now that it's out: from the blogosphere, Libertarian groups, and people who just love economics. (We were reviewed in *Forbes* magazine: really cool!) It was wonderful to watch these raging debates go on. They went for pages, arguing whether this system could work or not. But I'm not satisfied until people start actually debating this notion of freedom as a whole – what is the true value of it? Ultimately, the book is a human tragedy."

"Now that we've finished the sequels, we're writing an unrelated novel, **Father Figure**, in which women essentially run the world and men know their place. It will be an alternate history, breakpoint 1918. You're still in a sort of Victorian era, and then it pushes forward with women running everything. What's that going to look like governmentally, technologically, sociologically? Compared to the history of men running the world, it's a *much* better world."

EK: "Many fewer wars, far more assassinations.... As things stand now, if two gangs of boys on the playground don't like each other, they will beat the crap out of each other. If two gangs of girls don't like each other, there will be some sort of competition (physical, verbal) between the two alpha females, and then the one who wins will pick from the other gang the ones she wants to take with her."

DK: "In our novel's world, as it moves forward, Lincoln will be seen as a mass murderer – not the great hero, just another typical man, sending hundreds of thousands to their deaths when some assassination, some politicking,

could have saved the day. What Eytan and I are positing is that there will be a very interesting social order. Technologically, you're probably not going to have Internet or flight as we know it. You'll probably stay steam-punkian, to an extent."

"It's going to be controversial, what we're going to posit with women trying to run everything, mostly female families, and what men there are relegated to whatever work they can find. But they find that psychologically, children raised without a father figure – children raised in an entirely female atmosphere or an entirely male atmosphere – don't have as good a psychological balance. That gave us the book's title. So they bring the man back in for the second generation: 'We'll give them a pedestal, we'll allow them to be the father figure.' It revolves around the psychology of that. It's reverse sexism completely, like showing the rare male driver pulled over by a female cop, bat his eyelashes, show a little chest hair, and say, 'Oh, was I driving a little too quickly?'"

EK: "That just sucks! There should be equality. **Father Figure** came about because we were sitting in a restaurant and we realized (it was just one of those statistical flukes) that for that brief half hour, it was 17 women and three guys. We started thinking, 'What would it be like if this was normal? What would have to have happened for this to be the normal state of affairs?' And by the time we had finished lunch and rode the subway, we pretty much had the initial premise. And then we sat down and we outlined, outlined, outlined!"

"I will generally take the first draft, because (for whatever reason) my mind just lives in the world entirely, and I'll just encapsulate scenes and characters and stuff. I don't know how that works. But once we have it thoroughly ploughed, tilled and ready to go –"

DK: "– once it's on paper, then all the discussions come back to me. Eytan sees the world much more clearly than I do, but he doesn't enjoy the craft of writing as much as he likes storytelling. I want to know how you get from that idea to a passage where, as it hits me, I'm out of breath or I'm crying or I'm angry. He's clueless to that sort of emotional, visceral response. And I'm the one who will rewrite 20, 30 times. I'll look at a paragraph for two hours before I'm satisfied that the rhythm and the concept within the paragraph actually work. He never sweats that detail, but as an advertising copywriter that's my training."

"If Eytan was oil, I would be a refinery; how's that? You can't use that oil until it goes through the refinery. He's crude and I'm refined – I like that!"

EK: "The fun part is when we review the completed draft together. That's when the arguments happen."

DK: "But I think we've actually broken the one-million-word mark on the books by now, and we've only had two or three really huge arguments."

–Dani & Eytan Kollin ■