

Interview with Tina Howe

Alysa of the Fields: Book One in the Tellings of Xunar-kun

Tina Field Howe

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Reviewed by *Ian McCurley* (age 14) for Reader Views (4/08)

Reviewed by *Olivera Baumgartner-Jackson* for Reader Views (5/08)

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Tina Field Howe, who is here to talk about her novel, "Alysa of the Fields: Book One in the Tellings of Xunar-kun." I am also joined by our young adult reviewer, Ian McCurley, who recently read "Alysa of the Fields" and has some questions to ask the author.

Tina Howe holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Anthropology and Art. Her favorite college studies included physical and cultural anthropology, archaeology, studio art, and art history. Her love of creativity, her interest in diverse peoples, and the experience of her own struggles inspired her to write "Alysa of the Fields," in which she created the cultures, religions and creatures of a fantasy world. She has been writing for several years, mainly business communications, poetry, screenplays, web content, and short stories. Tina illustrated the cover and graphics, as well. The cover won the 2006 Dream Realm Awards for Cover Art. She has been involved in digital graphic design since the '90s and for most of her life has been creating artwork in some form.

Tyler: Welcome, Tina. I'm excited to hear about your new novel. To start out, I understand on planet Xunar-kun, the Field Folk clan believe themselves to be the only people left in the world other than the distant Trailmen. Will you tell us how this situation came to be on Xunar-kun?

Tina: There was a war 3,000 years before known as "Cat'clysm," which left the world largely devastated. People from "the City" escaped to the mountains. The societies had been highly technical before the war, but with the loss of technology, there was also loss of communication. The surviving people grouped into clans or tribes based on the philosophies of their leaders at that time in order to survive as best they could. One society became farmers, the other warriors—the Field Folk and Trailmen. They never did reclaim their higher technology. As a matter of fact, very little is known about the old technology, which was the way their founders wanted it. Book Two gets more into the rediscovered technology.

Ian: Is Xunar-kun based on earth?

Tina: There are similarities. I don't know if I could create a planet where nothing made sense, like another dimension. It would be so hard to describe. Before Cat'clysm, Xunar-kun was much more advanced technologically and culturally than Earth is.

Tyler: What made you decide to write about a land that had undergone a cataclysm and was now reemerging from it? Did the real world affect your creation?

Tina: I grew up during the Cold War. We were having air raid drills in elementary school, families were building air raid shelters, so I'm certain that this had something to do with my creating a planet that had been through a war. But what I really wanted to create was a situation in which people had been separated by some reason and were now in survival mode. They needed challenges, too, and recovery from war certainly provided those.

Tyler: Tell us about the main character, Alysa. Who is she and why do you think readers will like her?

Tina: There's so much for people to identify with. Alysa is unsure of herself, as many teens are. She struggles through great challenges to emerge as a reluctant hero. Many of her challenges are external, but perhaps she has the greatest battles with herself. I think readers, both male and female, identify with her on many levels. They can see her struggles within themselves.

Ian: Where did you get your inspiration for Alysa?

Tina: Out of thin air; that's how most of my writing ideas come to me. The beginning, middle and end came to me all at once; writing everything in between was the real challenge! I think it's easy to get ideas; completing them is quite another thing.

Tyler: What is the situation Alysa must deal with when the novel opens?

Tina: The first situation is that she's been the only child in her household for 10 years, and her new little sister has just been born. She struggles with guilt feelings, as children are difficult to conceive and carry to term because of the battle long ago. Alysa feels guilty for "hating" her little sister, at first; but this soon changes. I extracted this situation from my own experience, as when I was 10, a new little sister came into my life, whom I was not crazy about until I laid eyes on her.

Alysa's next struggle is a few years later, when her father suddenly dies. She is faced with having to delay her marriage and raise her sister pretty much by herself, as her mother has lapsed into a deep depression after losing her husband. There are many other struggles along the way, with levity provided by Alysa's relationship with her sister Ellee, Seda, her best friend, and their pets.

Ian: Why did you write from a girl's perspective?

Tina: I believe in writing what you know, so I wrote from a girl's perspective. BUT, in saying that, my experience, views and personality went into every character in the book, including the men and the non-benevolent characters. I just took sides of myself to extremes for them. For the men's roles, I did my best to think and behave like men. I think I created some terrific, guys!

Tyler: What if anything do you find difficult in portraying a female heroine who is capable of saving her people?

Tina: I built up her confidence and competence slowly; it couldn't happen all at once, or it wouldn't be believable. I let her make mistakes, understand where she went wrong, and try again, achieving small successes, then larger ones, all the while her confidence building. She would take one step back and two ahead. Then she had to get others to listen and take her seriously as danger approached. Coming from a society entrenched in traditions, getting them to listen to young people who "don't know anything," was tough.

Tyler: What is the danger that approaches and that Alysa must face?

Tina: The M'raudas, a form of mutant, thought to have long died out, come to the mountains. They steal some of the Field Folk's children, one of them, the infant daughter of Alysa's best friend. The Field Folk know nothing about defending themselves, so Alysa approaches the Trailmen for help. The Folk are not at all tolerant of the Trailmen, and it seems like they would prefer just to let the children vanish, let the trouble pass, than to enlist the Trailmen. Alysa can't stand the thought of this, so undertakes a dangerous journey to bring the Trailmen back to the mountains.

Tyler: On your website, it says, "Alysa proves that a champion lives inside each one of us." What made you decide that would be the purpose of your book, to make people realize the champions inside themselves?

Tina: That phrase didn't come to me until after I published the book and created the website. I was looking for a short phrase that would convey a theme that most everyone could identify with. I never used the word "champion" in Book One, but it's in Book Two. I even wrote a song for Book Two that praises Alysa's being a champion.

Tyler: What did you enjoy most about creating an entire new world?

Ian: I enjoyed creating the history, legends, technology, societies and religions, probably due to my background in Anthropology. I have a sense of what comprises these elements, so I created my own, plus the technology, setting, etc. This is a lot of fun for me and challenging, as it keeps me thinking. I wanted to create a world similar to Earth, but I didn't want to create the typical post-apocalyptic setting in which Earth's history is incorporated and we learn where we went wrong. I wanted something people really had to guess about. Then in later stories, the truth comes out, and it bears little resemblance to Earth's history.

Tyler: Will you tell us about the technology? Did it destroy the old world? Was it more advanced than the technology of the real world today?

Tina: In the history, which is just being learned by the characters in this story, the technology was superior before the war: huge cities, vast farmlands, a large network of roads, flying vehicles, advanced cultures. Xunar-kun was much more advanced than Earth is. The reason Cat'clysm happened is still a mystery, but the fear is that if the old technology is discovered and used, will there be such a war again?

Tyler: What role does religion play in the novel since you mentioned you created religions as well?

Tina: Although this is not a "religious" book, religions are key. In order to have complete and true societies, they must have a spiritual component. The Field Folk revere Father Gord'n, the man who brought them to the mountains just before Cat'clysm, as a God. They never talk about a power higher than he is. The Trailmen, on the other hand, believe in the Forever One, an entity that can't be seen but for which they have faith. The Trailmen are very spiritually philosophical and believe that the Forever One plays a large part in their life paths. In Book Two, I get into legends the tribes have about the creation of the world. The Field Folk's explanation is scientific; the Trailmen's, mystical.

Ian: Is the tribal structure of the Field Folk and Tribesmen of social parody of any existing situation?

Tina: No. I didn't have any groups of people in mind, although it may seem that one group is more conservative and the other more liberal. Some people see socialistic traits in the Field Folk.

Tyler: Did you have concerns about making your fantasy world appear believable? What do you feel is the fine line in keeping a reader's suspension of disbelief?

Tina: To make the fantasy believable, I created a lot of creatures that I haven't seen anywhere else, ways of dressing and adornment that are unusual, and many ceremonies and customs. I tried to stay away from terms that are "Earthlike," such as names for things, people, slang, and especially cliches. One of the most difficult scenes I had to rewrite, and many times, was the one in which Orryn describes a hologram to Alysa. I could have just used the word "hologram" and the description would have been immediately grasped by the reader. But I wanted Orryn to struggle in describing this technology to Alysa, as he did not know the term. Perhaps the ancestors didn't call this technology a hologram, anyway!

I think that in any kind of fiction, things can't be too easy. If they're too easy or convenient, people will put the book down. You have to give your characters good challenges, make your characters suffer, make the reader root for them and keep hoping that they'll survive. If your characters suffer, chances are your readers have suffered in a similar way at one time, and they want to see how the character gets through their challenge. I teach creative writing workshops. One of the things I tell students is that your fiction has to read like it's true. I guess that's the fine line.

Ian: Why did you write "Alysa of the Fields"?

Tina: I had to do it; I was driven. The characters wouldn't leave me alone. After I started writing, and if I became stuck (I don't believe in "writer's block"), they would act out the next scene for me in my dreams!

Ian: What is your favorite part of the book?

Tina: Now that's the toughest question of all! I think when Alysa finds out how tolerant and caring the Trailmen are. She learns the truth about them, and this is a huge eye-opener for her. Then her struggles get even bigger, because now she knows that, in order to do the right thing, she's going to have to make choices that go against her own clan's Laws.

Tyler: Tina, I understand besides the book format, "Alysa of the Fields" is going to be a screenplay and a book on tape. Will you tell us more about these projects?

Tina: I've written a few screenplays that started out as movie ideas, not book ideas. Those screenplays were fun and relatively quick to create. I conceptualize visually, so the movie format works really well for me. "Alysa" came to me in pictures, but it evolved slowly. I felt it best to write it as a novel. Last fall I made a connection in the film industry that prompted me to convert the book to a screenplay. Wow, was that tough! It took me three months. Because screenplays are stripped down and much shorter than novels, it required cutting out two-thirds of the words—two-thirds of the words I had struggled so hard to get right in the first place! Then in places in which Alysa's thoughts and memories are key, I had to create new scenes to show them, since I didn't want to use voiceover. If Book Two is converted into a screenplay, I'd rather a screenwriting pro convert it, with me in a consulting role.

I started the book on tape project when so many people told me they didn't buy many books and instead listened to books during their commutes to work. I haven't started recording yet, but I've been working on character assignments and have some actors lined up. I have a pretty good recording voice and will be reading the narrative. After I publish Book Two, I'll focus on getting Book One recorded and produced.

Tyler: Will you give us a preview of Book Two?

Tina: I don't want to give too much away, as the end of Book One points to the beginning of Book Two; all I can say now is that Book Two is four years later, there's a new and very dangerous antagonist, new challenges, further development of characters, and new learnings.

Tyler: How many books do you think the series will consist of?

Tina: I'm close to having the draft of Book Two done. I have a theme and title for Book Three, and I'm creating characters in Book Two that will be grown up in Book Four...so we'll have to wait and see! Xunar-kun is a planet of mystery on which anything could happen.

Tyler: Tina, did you always want to be a writer?

Tina: When I was in high school, I did pretty well on my school papers. Then I got an idea for a story, a truly frightening thing that was in the news, and a storyline and characters jumped into my head. I sat down and tried to write it all at once, as if writing is a linear and you get-it-down-right-away process. Ha! I had no mentors to help me understand that writing is a writing and rewriting, actually very non-linear process. I teach writing workshops now, and that's one of the first things I talk about: writing is not necessarily a linear process, but your finished work must read that way.

I got back into writing in my early 30s through a Writer's Digest School in fiction writing program (these were done through the mail then, before the Internet; I worked with horror writer J. N. Williamson). I wrote many stories, was even a finalist in Writers of the Future. I did lots of business writing, a few screenplays, newsletters, web content over the years then got serious again about creative writing maybe six years ago.

Tyler: Have you been influenced by any other writers of fantasy or other genres in your own writing?

Tina: My very favorite writer is Ursula K. LeGuin. I started reading her in college, when I was an anthropology student. I just loved her writing, her characters and the worlds she created. When I discovered that she was the daughter of Alfred Kroeber, the famous anthropologist, I understood why I loved her stories so much. She must have had quite an interesting upbringing. I think I've read everything she's written. She's a very visual writer, and introspective, creates complex societies, and I like these aspects. I've read many other authors, but she's the one I get the most enjoyment and learning from.

Tyler: Thank you, Tina, for joining me today. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information can be found there about “Alysa of the Fields”?

Tina: There's a calendar of events on the site that lists book signings, author events, festivals, and performances based on the characters, which I'm just beginning to do. There are news articles, reviews, reader comments, various outlets for book purchase, links to my publisher, a link to my creative writing workshop site, and so on. Thank you, Tyler, for asking such stimulating questions!

Tyler: Thank you, Tina, and I hope you'll come back to tell us more when your next book is published.

Tina: Thank you for having me. It'll be my pleasure to continue the journey with you.

