

Hughart, Rasmussen, and little guys versus the juggernaut

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

My question in the Bookseller Furor post about what happened to Barry Hughart and Alis Rasmussen was rhetorical. I **know** what happened to both of them; I was oddly involved in both writers' careers.

Barry Hughart was the brilliant, World-Fantasy-Award-winning author of *Bridge of Birds* and its sequels, *The Story of the Stone*, and *Eight Skilled Gentlemen*. I came into this story late. I'd read and loved all three books and hated the fact that there was no fourth.

My then-husband, ironically a Waldenbooks bookseller and one of the best hand-sellers I'd ever met (this was, in fact, **how** we met), my then-publisher, and I were at dinner, and over dinner, the conversation wandered to who in writing was good, and my publisher asked me who I thought he ought to buy. I don't know if this is something he routinely asked authors, but I know that I didn't even have to think about my answer.

I said, "Barry Hughart." I described the books, the awards, the brilliance, and the fact that he wasn't currently writing for anyone, and my publisher shrugged.

"Couldn't sell him," he said. "His numbers got eaten by the chains ordering system, and I couldn't get them to order anything new in by him in numbers large enough to be anything but a loss for me. Maybe if he changed his name..."

As for Alis Rasmussen, she and I had the same first publisher, (though at different times). She did one book with him, then pursued a more lucrative offer from an editor at another house. She did a most excellent trilogy for that editor, and it died by the chains order-to-the-net policy. Her career was dead under her own name. I met her after she'd changed her pen name to Kate Elliot, and was selling *Jaran*, another brilliant book. We shared a signing table at a Waldenbooks, and because traffic was painfully slow, had plenty of time to talk. At a later date I recommended her to my then-agent, and he loved her work, and took her on, and moved her to DAW, where she broke out in no uncertain terms—deservedly, and after years of having her career beaten to pulp by the same computerized ordering system that hurts most of us.

It's a David and Goliath story, told over and over again. Anyone who isn't King, Koontz, or Nora Roberts has fought with it. And while many people root for and stand up for the underdog, there are as many—as witnessed by the angry chain booksellers currently rubbing their hands gleefully at the prospect of stripping my books, who think if the giant is a giant, it must be because he's good (and who will hotly defend even the giant's basest practices, even to the point of lying about those who point them out), and who truly believe if little guys get crushed under his feet, it is the little guy's own damn fault. And by the readers [same to links, read the comments] who fervently believe that if the writer's books do not survive, it is because they don't deserve to.

It's a good reminder for any of you thinking of pursuing a career in this business.

All articles in this series, in order:

- The Tonk need a rescue
- Selling to the net
- Bookseller furor
- Hughart, Rasmussen, and little guys versus the

juggernaut

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