

1. THE DAWN OF DRAGONS

THE EXISTENCE OF DRAGONS

Chris recently found an article on the Internet stating that if you compared the history of Earth with a calendar year, then the first cell of anything that could be called “life” did not appear until midsummer. Plants followed in August, then the various animals in the next few months. Dinosaurs arrived at the winter solstice, around December 21, and died out by the day after Christmas, the 26. Humans didn’t appear until early evening of the 31, and true civilization not until four minutes to midnight. Allegedly, many living species became extinct “daily” — *Including dragons*, he thought, in a blinding flash of inspiration.

Now, I don't know about you, but to him that is a very exciting concept. Not that dragons died out, of course, but that they might actually have existed in the first place on this wonderful blue planet of ours. Imagine seeing a group of them (a flock? a wing? a *flame*?) soaring and swooping overhead in the warmth of the sun. Or beating their huge majestic wings against a fierce Arctic gale. Would you be scared silly or would you be exhilarated? Would you rush outside to stare in wonder at the spectacle, or would you cover indoors, too terrified to even peek through the window? Or would you be so used to seeing them around that you would just accept their presence and go about your normal day without paying them much attention? These are some of the questions that Chris wanted to find his own answers to when he wrote the Last Dragon Chronicles.

He is often asked whether he believes that dragons did exist on this world, and he usually replies, "I'd like to." He is in very good company. From doing some background reading, I found that while relatively few

people do believe in their one-time existence, a large majority, just like Chris, would like to. What can it be about dragons that fires (sorry!) the imagination so strongly? Especially since, overall, they have had pretty lousy press.

Think of most dragon legends and myths; it seems like nine times out of ten they feature dragons as the bad guys — fire-breathing monsters who would have you for dinner as soon as look at you. Personally, I reckon all this was a ploy to keep knights in shining armor in work. What else could they do, after all, apart from rescue helpless damsels in distress? No damsels, no job. To be fair, there are some cultures around the world that do revere dragons and think them admirable creatures, *and* definitely believe that they were real. China is the most notable example, Vietnam another, and, much closer to Chris's home, Wales has its own red dragon.

But love them or loathe them, they do seem to pop up in so many countries' legends that you have to think that there is something in it. "No smoke without fire"

comes to mind — a highly appropriate phrase, in the circumstances.

Perhaps there is a common folk memory or group recall from way back, or maybe it is all simply wishful thinking, that we feel that there somehow just “ought” to be dragons, to fulfill some unacknowledged and unconscious need in us all. Or, to stretch the imagination a little further, could it be that they did (still do?) exist, but on some other world, and that there was a bleed-through or crossover to this one in the dim and distant past, mentally and emotionally, if not physically? Whichever way, belief in dragons does seem to be “hardwired into the human consciousness.” I don’t know who came up with that phrase, but I think it sums it all up beautifully.

CHRIS D’LACEY’S DRAGONS

Although there is this huge fascination with dragons, Chris himself, when asked, always used to say that he wasn’t particularly smitten with them in his early years;

he never gave them much thought. However, on closer questioning for this book, I discovered that one of his all-time favorite books from childhood is *The Hobbit*, by J. R. R. Tolkien. And guess who one of the main characters is? Smaug, a classic “bad” dragon who sits on his pile of stolen treasure and roars vengeance on anyone who dares to intrude upon him. The edition that we have even has Smaug defending his ill-gotten gains on the cover. A subtle influence there, perhaps, after all.

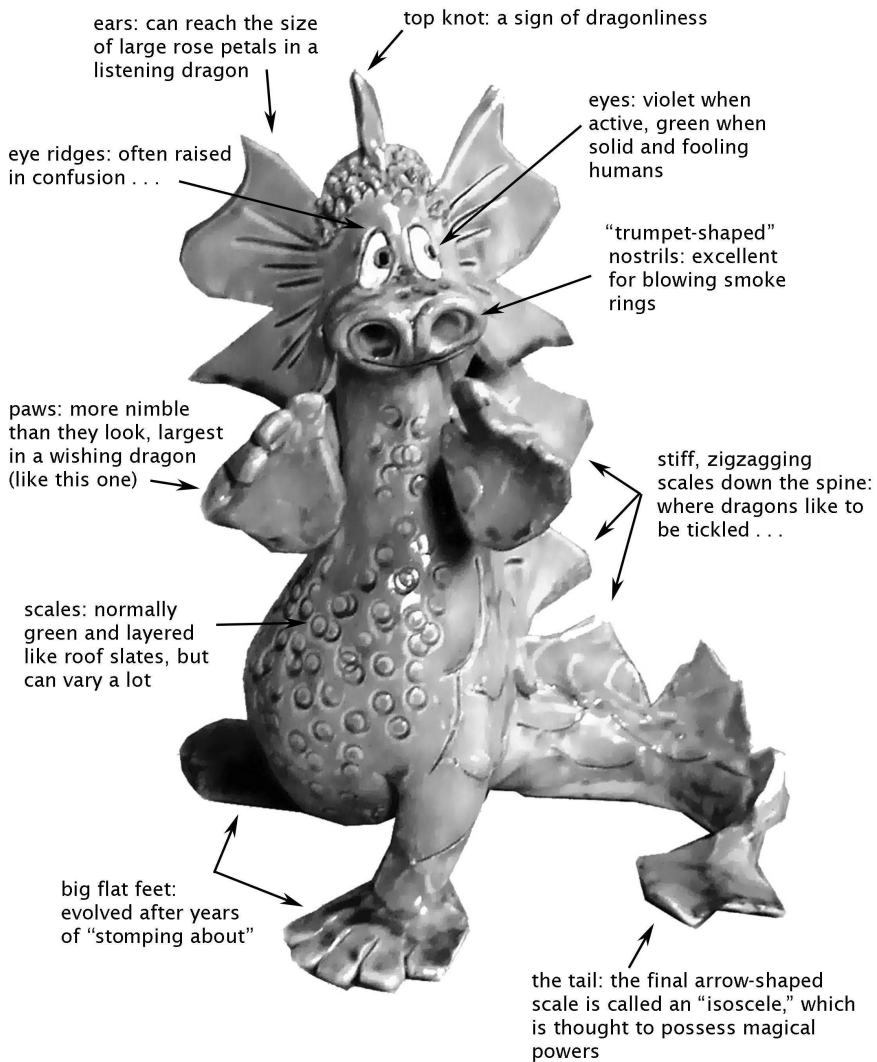
Chris’s current take on dragons is that they are noble beasts, worthy of respect and awe, spiritual guardians of the planet and servants and defenders of Gaia, Mother Earth. But Chris does not limit himself to one type of dragon; in the Last Dragon Chronicles, there are two very different sorts — one large, one small; both benevolent. The first, as you might expect, are the *relatively* traditional “real” dragons; full-sized, immensely powerful, fire-breathing, and truly awesome. But they are birthed from eggs by parthenogenesis. . . .

The second type is more unusual still. They are about eight to ten inches tall and made from clay by one of the main characters, a potter named Elizabeth Pennykettle. She sometimes uses something called “ice-fire” in the process, which makes them into “special” dragons, that is, those that can come alive. All the dragons speak variants of a language called dragontongue, as do Liz and her daughter, Lucy, as well as the odd polar bear or two. (Yes, that’s right, polar bears. I’ll come to those a bit later.) These small dragons are to be found all around the Pennykettles’ home, from the entrance hall to the Dragons’ Den, where they are created.

David Rain, the hero of the series, even uses the Pennykettles’ bathroom, which has a small “puffler” dragon named Gloria sitting on the toilet tank in front of him. She’s there to “puffle” a pleasant rose scent when necessary. David does have the grace to turn her to face the wall — but whether to spare her blushes or his own, who can say?

THE DAWN OF DRAGONS

Each of the special clay dragons that Liz creates has a particular talent or ability. There is a wishing dragon, a guard dragon (who is rather young and inexperienced and therefore always needing to check his manual for the correct procedure), a natural healing dragon, and many more. But the one you most need to know about is Gadzooks. Zookie, as he is also known, is made especially for David as a housewarming gift when he comes to lodge in the Pennykettle household, and he is an inspirational writing dragon. Gadzooks helps David get unstuck when faced with any problem — particularly writer’s block. This is just as well, as David, like Chris, eventually becomes a writer. . . .



The anatomy of a Pennykettle dragon