Mermaid Steel – The Story Behind the Story

A running joke among writers is to ask, “Where do you get your ideas?” Harlan Ellison famously answered that he sent off to an idea factory in Schenectady, NY. I have no doubt you will get as many answers to this question as authors you ask. I can’t answer for anyone else, but I seem to be a collector of notions and a habitual puzzle solver. I do, in fact, love solving 3-d puzzles. I highly recommend Hanayama. The collecting certainly goes along with being a costumer packrat. I can see the reality TV show: Idea Hoarders. That would be me.

So, not surprisingly, Mermaid Steel is the product of years of subconsciously collecting ideas and patiently fitting the pieces together to make something new.

I have always thought Romeo and Juliet would be very well suited to a Pacific Island setting. Warring families, social taboos, questionable priests, beautiful young lovers, it’s a perfect fit. I imagine some theater company in Hawaii or New Zealand has already done it. Maybe someday I’ll be lucky enough to see it staged that way. In the meantime, this idea has been percolating in the back of my mind for years.

Many years ago when I was actively costuming for the fantasy/science fiction stage, I designed a set of huge, Las Vegas scale costumes of the Polynesian gods of the earth, sea and sky playing out their legendary tryst. Rangi, the god of the sky lies with mother Earth, named Papa, each night. Papa is wed to Tangaroa, the god of the sea. Each morning when the sun comes up, Papa cries at Rangi’s departure, which is where we get dew. One day Rangi takes too long getting out of bed and Tangaroa catches him and spears him in the leg. I envisioned this as playing well on a WorldCon stage, with gigantic sweeping wings and capes, a spear fight and lots of red glitter. Being a packrat costumer at heart, I still have the half- finished costumes in a box. In putting the vignette together, I read up on Polynesian myths, and I liked what I read.

Fast forward 30 years, my costuming is limited to dressing up my kids, and I’m writing novels. In addition to all the medical research I did in writing Daughter Cell, I also read up on a religion called Cheondogyo, which is the Korean Heavenly Way. It teaches that a piece of God lives in all of us, and that our higher purpose if life is to live up that divine heritage. Not to spoil anything, but someone in the story abuses this notion and takes the faith to mean that pursuing selfish improvement is divinely sanctioned.

Back when I was researching The Chosen, among the many topics I read up on was the Nazi myth of the secret order of Thule, and the Atlantean Supermen, from whom the Aryans were supposed to have descended.

Throw into this mix the seemingly endless debate certain of my history buff friends seem locked in over Jared Diamond’s book Guns, Germs and Steel.

Throw this all into the pot, set on simmer and stir occasionally. Years later: Idea Gumbo.

Mermaid Steel is the story of two villages, one human and one mermaid, that both live off the fish in a bountiful bay in the tropics. The humans have advanced to where they are making fine enough steel to start building sophisticated machines, including guns. So think of the Goa coast of India around 1700. The humans are foreigners from a colder climate who have been here for about 100 years, long enough ago that they did not have good steel when they arrived. The mermaids have been here all along.

The humans believe they are all descended from a perfect man, named Atlan, who was the sole survivor of an ancient time of cataclysm, who went on to be the seminal source of all humans on earth - sort of a Robert Heinlein version of Abraham. Atlan represented the best a human can be, so believers feel their higher calling is to fulfill their Atlantean heritage and be as brave and as smart and as strong as they can be. Needless to say, this ideal is often corrupted, like all ideals, to support selfishness.

The mermaids, who call themselves Merrow, believe in a benevolent goddess Rorra, who is the sea itself. They believe Rorra takes care of them, even if it takes a seemingly long time for things to work out. They therefore do not have a concept of personal property. Their lives are built around community. They don’t understand the concept of buying something from someone. You do what needs to be done, and a gift is a gift.

A hundred years ago, when the humans built their village, the humans and the Merrow fought over the bay, and they reached a treaty. The treaty delineates what fishing grounds are for human use and which are not. It also prohibits commerce between the two races. This arrangement kept the Merrow culture intact and everyone fed for several generations.

At the time of this book, that peace is breaking down. The human village has grown and the fishermen expand their fishing grounds whenever they can get away with it. The problem is, the Merrow would rather keep the peace than fight over grounds they do not really believe belong to them anyway.

This has historical precedence in the Westernization of the Pacific islands. First it was missionaries, and then settlers who came and took land. The islanders were not prepared to negotiate, since they did not have a sense of personal ownership. They gave up more and more land until they found themselves displaced.

The Merrow are also at a distinct disadvantage because the humans have developed technologies the Merrow cannot duplicate. They can’t forge metal underwater, so they scavenge castoff metal fixtures. The humans have grown suspicious of this. By the time this book starts, the humans have all but written off the Merrow as a race of thieves. The fact they can disappear and reappear suddenly from beneath the waves only adds to the suspicions and accusations.

So the culture clash the treaty was supposed to prevent has boiled up to the humans thinking the Merrow are thieves and the Merrow thinking the humans are greedy land grabbers.

In the midst of this tension, Chielle, our young Merrow heroine, befriends Sten, the village blacksmith. Chielle is a rule breaker in her peoples’ eyes, and Sten has his own personal history of dealing with justice issues. So they are the right people to try to bridge the gap. Clearly they have a lot going against them.

The cultural differences go even deeper. The humans play fast paced, jig music and dance accordingly, with great emphasis on their feet. The Merrow play rhythmic percussion and song, which works fine underwater, akin to Indian Bolly music, with dancing that sways and wiggles, focused on their tails. As Chielle and Sten’s relationship grows, this difference is one more obstacle for them to overcome.

Then, of course, there is the minor matter of mismatched anatomies when they eventually want to become intimate. She’s a cetacean and he’s a human.

Their biggest difference, of course is how they see the world. Sten’s Atlantean ideal is all about doing good with your own two hands. Chielle’s faith in Rorra is all about trusting the divine to provide. They bridge that gap by learning from each other.

So I hope you can see how the various influences I listed at the start have ended up in this story. I am happy to report that, as much fun as it was fitting the pieces together to create the story, I am having even more fun actually writing it. My hope, of course, is at the end of the path, you will enjoy reading it even more.