



James Rollins

Jake Ransom and the Skull King's Shadow
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What triggered the concept for the world of Pangaea, a prehistoric land inhabited by lost ancient cultures?

I wanted to create a fantasy world where all manner of ancient civilizations were forced to work together to survive—Mayans, Egyptians, Vikings, Romans, etc. But where to put them? I could have transported them to an entirely new world or land, but I thought, What if groups of them were lifted from their present timeline and dragged back into the past—into the prehistoric past—where dinosaurs still roamed? How would they survive? And that began the grand adventure as Jake Ransom and his older sister are also dropped into this savage past, to solve the mystery of their lost parents. **What kind of research or travel did you do for *Jake Ransom and the Howling Sphinx*?** While I wish I could say I took a jaunt into the prehistoric past to research this novel, I did do extensive research into Egyptian myths and legends—and uncovered stories about the mysterious disappearance of Nefertiti, a great Egyptian queen who vanished strangely out of the historical record. Historians are still arguing about what happened to her. In my new novel, I have my own opinion. **How did you research the dinosaurs that appear in *Jake Ransom and the Howling Sphinx*? Are they all real dinosaurs?** All the dinosaurs referenced in the novel were indeed real—though that doesn't mean I didn't create a few fantastical creatures to populate this prehistoric world, too. I've always considered myself an armchair archaeologist, so all things saurian—great and small—have always fascinated me. ***Jake Ransom and the Howling Sphinx* draws on the history and myth of Ancient Egypt. Where does your interest in Ancient Egypt come from?** Three cultures that have always interested me are the Mayans, the Egyptians, and the Vikings. Not surprisingly, the Jake Ransom series follows this same path. The first book—*Jake Ransom and the Skull King's Shadow*—deals with Mayan mythology, history, and culture. The latest book is all about the Egyptians. And as you might guess, the following book will deal extensively with the Vikings. **What other mythologies have influenced the Jake Ransom series?** It's hard to explore a set of 'lost ancient civilizations' without acknowledging the Greeks and Romans, so onto the page stepped Pindor, a Roman boy, and one of the main supporting characters. But you'll also see glimpses of many other peoples, including Native Americans who ride great winged birds and even Neanderthals, who have been living in this land the longest and who hold many deep secrets. **How did you invent the Atlantean alphabet that appears in clues throughout the book?** I've always enjoyed fantasy books where a foreign/ancient language comes to life and plays a vital role in the story—like the elfish script found in *Lord of the Rings*. So I painstakingly created my own language: the lost alphabet of the Atlantis race. There are many more surprises locked within that script—including secret messages imbedded into the book for the avid code breakers out there. **How much do you draw from your own experiences when writing your characters? Have you ever taken Tae Kwan Do lessons like Jake, or fencing lessons like Kady?** I've taken fencing lessons, but not Tae Kwan Do. That said, next to my veterinary clinic was a Karate school, and I talked to the teachers there extensively about how to fight, defend, and master basic techniques. **You've said that the character Jake is a lot like your younger self. Is Kady based on a real person?** I grew up with three sisters. Kady is a combination of all three. But don't tell them I said that, or I'm in big trouble. **Are any of the characters or situations in *Jake Ransom and the Howling Sphinx* inspired by real-life people or events?** I don't think any writers spin story and character out of thin air. We draw upon people we know, upon stories we've heard. I've also done exhaustive research into these lost cultures to try to create the most authentic characters possible, including that of the young Nefertiti. **How did you develop the villain of the Jake Ransom series, the menacing Skull King?** I wanted someone mysterious, powerful, and strangely connected to our young hero. So I have Kalverum Rex—the infamous Skull King—armored in shadows and seldom seen on stage. So far we know he is a powerful alchemist who started dabbling in dark arts involving blood and terror. As the series progresses, more and more will be revealed about who and what the Skull King is. **Will any of Jake's companions from Pangaea, such as Pindor the Roman or Bach'uuk the Neanderthal, return for future adventures?** Of course! Along with Marika, they are Jake's best friends. They are bound together by strange magnetic wristbands. So where Jake goes, his friends have no choice but to follow. But even these special companions have secrets and will grow and develop alongside our hero. **Do you begin writing a new series with a roadmap for all future books in your head, or do you improvise from book to book?** I definitely have an overarching plot line to the series. I know how it all ends, and I have outlined the main stepping-stones, across a vast and ever-flowing river, to get there. Yet, half the fun of writing is filling up those unknown spaces in between. That's where the true magic of storytelling unfolds. **Did you face any challenges in writing an adventure with such strong fantasy elements, as opposed to a story set only in the 'real world'?** One of the dangers of fantasy writing is not letting the 'magic' of your world overrun your characters and plot. Magic must have limitations, rules, and costs. It is one weapon among many and should not be the sole driver of a plot. And the best weapon of all? It's not a magic ring or wand. It's the wit, wisdom, and heart of the hero. That's the real magic I strive for in each book. **What did you find most interesting or surprising to learn as you mapped out the plot to *Jake Ransom and the Howling Sphinx*?** It was the introduction of a tiny winged creature—half dragon, half snake—called a wisling. He appeared midway through this book, pestering the heck out of Jake, and refused to leave. He's now a major character and plot point. That is an example of the unexpected magic found between the plotted stepping-stones. **Have you faced any unexpected challenges in writing your first middle-grade series?** Challenges? Sure. It's an entirely new audience and requires some streamlining of plot, but overall it's been a pure joy to go with Jake on these adventures. **How did your background as a veterinarian help you develop the unusual creatures in *Jake Ransom and the Howling Sphinx*?** Ah, as a lover of all creatures great and small, it's been so much fun to create the fantastical animals (even some flesh-eating plants) that populate these books. But I also try my best to ground them in reality, drawing on my knowledge of all the world's animals to create beasts that are as real as they are strange. **Without giving away any secrets—what do future books have in store for Jake and Kady?** As I mentioned above—and will be no great secret to those who finish *Jake Ransom and the Howling Sphinx*—we'll be heading next to a fiery and icy archipelago of islands, where Norse mythology will come to life and more will be learned about Jake's parents and the shadowy monster known as the Skull King.