A Number of Princes in Amber

Roger Zelazny

I have been asked on numerous occasions whether the Amber books were influenced by Jessie L. Weston’s From Ritual to Romance, by Philip José Farmer’s World of Tiers novels, by Celtic mythology and Arthurian legend. The answer to all of these, in varying degrees, is yes.

I had been reading the World of Tiers novels before beginning work on Nine Princes in Amber, and I decided at that time that I would one day write something involving a large family of peculiarly endowed near-immortals who did not get along very well with each other.

As for the Weston book and the legendary and mythological materials—their substance was already present in my mind and had been for a long while. I had no conscious intention of combining these themes, motifs, ideas, with the family situation suggested to me by the Farmer books.

Then I began to write a book. I had no plot, no story, only an opening situation. I sometimes work that way, because I enjoy seeing what will turn up. What I wanted to try was the more or less classical amnesia beginning. I had, at the time, no notion that this was to be the book which would involve all those elements I just mentioned. I did not even know who Corwin was, or what he would do once he had delivered himself from Greenwood.

Somewhere along the way, in writing that first chapter, I recalled once having played with a title in the abstract—something involving the words “Amber” and “Princes”. I did not, during the title games, know what they represented. But the words “Princes in Amber” came back to me while writing that sequence. When they did, it felt that they belonged, and I decided to retain them for that story. It was not until Corwin, whose name I discovered at the same time he did, had gotten to Flora’s place and located a set of the Trumps that I learned exactly how many “Princes in Amber” there would be. The idea of a particular number in the title did not occur to me until Corwin began going through the deck of cards. “Seven Princes in Amber”? I asked myself. “Ten?” “Five?” Naw. I just went along, creating the portraits of the people on the cards—which seemed a good device for getting everyone described in a story I felt was going to involve a lot of characters—and when I was finished, I counted them. Nine? Okay. It would be Nine Princes in Amber. And it struck me at this time that this was going to be the piece that the Farmer books had suggested to me.

Then it occurred to me that it was rather odd for anyone to have a deck of cards such as that hidden carefully away. They must have some special function.

Suddenly, I knew what the Trumps were and how they worked.

And now that the characters had been described, it was time to bring another of them onto the scene. A random choice followed.

By the time Corwin and Random got together, the plot had unfolded considerably for me. I could see the journey to Amber, Corwin’s walking the Pattern and recovering his memory, the attack on Amber, Corwin’s capture…

I had better pause here to explain that I do not write all of my books in this fashion. There are some that I actually outline, to various extents, before I begin writing. For this reason, they invariably get written quickly. On the other hand, I know that I possess a subconscious plotting mechanism and that it always delivers. Sometimes it is a lot slower, though. It is more fun, however, because it combines the best features of writing and reading—in that I do not really know in advance how everything is going to turn out, but I do get to be right on the scene, even participating in its happening. And, as the various incidents emerge, I do see where some of them are coming from; hence, my awareness of Weston and the mythological and legendary sources.

As it happened, Nine Princes in Amber moved right along, and the book was written in less than a month. And by the time Corwin was blinded and imprisoned, I knew that there would have to be at least one more book to wind things up. Until then, I had had no intention of making the story into a series.

I considered doing the next book from a different character’s point of view. I could foresee technical difficulties in that approach, though; and besides, I had grown fond enough of Corwin to be willing to follow through more than one book.

So I did. I began The Guns of Avalon and wrote the first quarter of it during the next couple of weeks. Then I put it in a drawer and didn’t look at it again for two years. Why? I had begun the Amber books on spec—i.e., without a contract, and at that point I realized that I had to get back to work on some pending pay copy. One thing after another occupied me during the next two years.

In the meantime, I had let a typist do up the final copy of Nine Princes in Amber, as the draft was kind of messy. I sold the book to Doubleday, made a lip-service resolution to get back to Guns… one day and went on with the other business. At some later date, though, I had a carte blanche contract to fulfill for Doubleday and the deadline was drawing nearer. It was obvious that less work would be involved in completing a quarter-written novel than in starting a new one from scratch. So I dusted off the MS of Guns… and completed it. Several people have claimed to have noticed some sort of change in the writing of this book—and since, without prompting, they put their fingers on the spot where I resumed writing (page 51 of the hardcover copy), it is likely that my writing changed or the material suspended in limbo had rearranged itself a bit—or both in the interim. Whatever, as I wrote I knew that there would have to be at least another book. But I still did not know how many. Maybe I could wind it up as a trilogy.

Later, somewhere in the midst of Sign of the Unicorn, I began to see how the entire story was going to work out—in general terms—and I was not certain that even a fourth book would do it. Sign of the Unicorn, The Hand of Oberon, and The Courts of Chaos were each written straight through, without recourse to the drawer, but I wrote other books between them, partly to vacation from Amber, and partly because I like to vary my output between first and third person narratives.

As I’ve said in other places, I do not like the idea of an interminable series, of leaving the reader and the main issues suspended forever. This seems unfair to both. At some point, therefore, I had to conclude the story I had begun in Nine Princes in Amber. I did so in The Courts of Chaos. That story is now told, and any inconsistencies can clearly be laid to some residual shakiness in Corwin’s crowded memory. I do not feel that the conclusion of the story I was telling precludes my ever returning to Amber or the surviving Amberites to tell another, different story, or stories.

At this time, though, I am not about to. I am doing other things and I want to give the Amberites a rest. Also, all five Amber books are currently under film option, with a clause in the option agreement saying that if they were to go ahead and make several Amber movies, exhausting the entire existing plot-line, and if such films were sufficiently popular to warrant an additional movie, I would then be willing to write another book to provide such material. It is highly unlikely that this will ever come to pass (though one can always dream), but it further justifies some of the scandalous things Flora has been doing by way of recreation, Gerard’s almost pure sword and sorcery activities of late and some of the strange trips Julian has been taking now that the pressure is off. We are all enjoying the respite.

Whatever course the film situation takes—say, even the worst—I have not barred myself from writing more Amber stories by the nature of the option agreement, though prudence counsels waiting for a time to see what sort of Amber tale might be next in order. It is a similar situation to that which I knew partway through the writing of the series—“Seven Princes in Amber?” “Ten?”—“Five books?” “Six?”

Life is uncertain.

Notes

In 1980, during a 7-year hiatus between finishing The Courts of Chaos and starting Trumps of Doom (the first book in the second Amber series), Zelazny looked back at how Nine Princes in Amber began in January 1967. He recalled some details incorrectly (rf. the details on writing Nine Princes in Amber and his contemporary correspondence in volume 2’s monograph “…And Call Me Roger” beginning on page 544). He had already planned a trilogy—Nine Princes in Amber, The Guns of Avalon, and The Courts of Chaos—before finishing the first novel in January 1967[[1]](#footnote-1). This essay originally appeared as “The Road to Amber”; to avoid confusion with a 1995 essay also entitled “The Road to Amber,” it has Zelazny’s original title here.

1. Letter from Roger Zelazny to Doubleday Editor Lawrence P. Ashmead, dated February 13, 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)