

BOULDER

# WEEKLY



dungeon

master

When it comes to broadswords, dragons and scoring booty, Keith Baker rules the world.

by Vince Darcangelo

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No woman's hero

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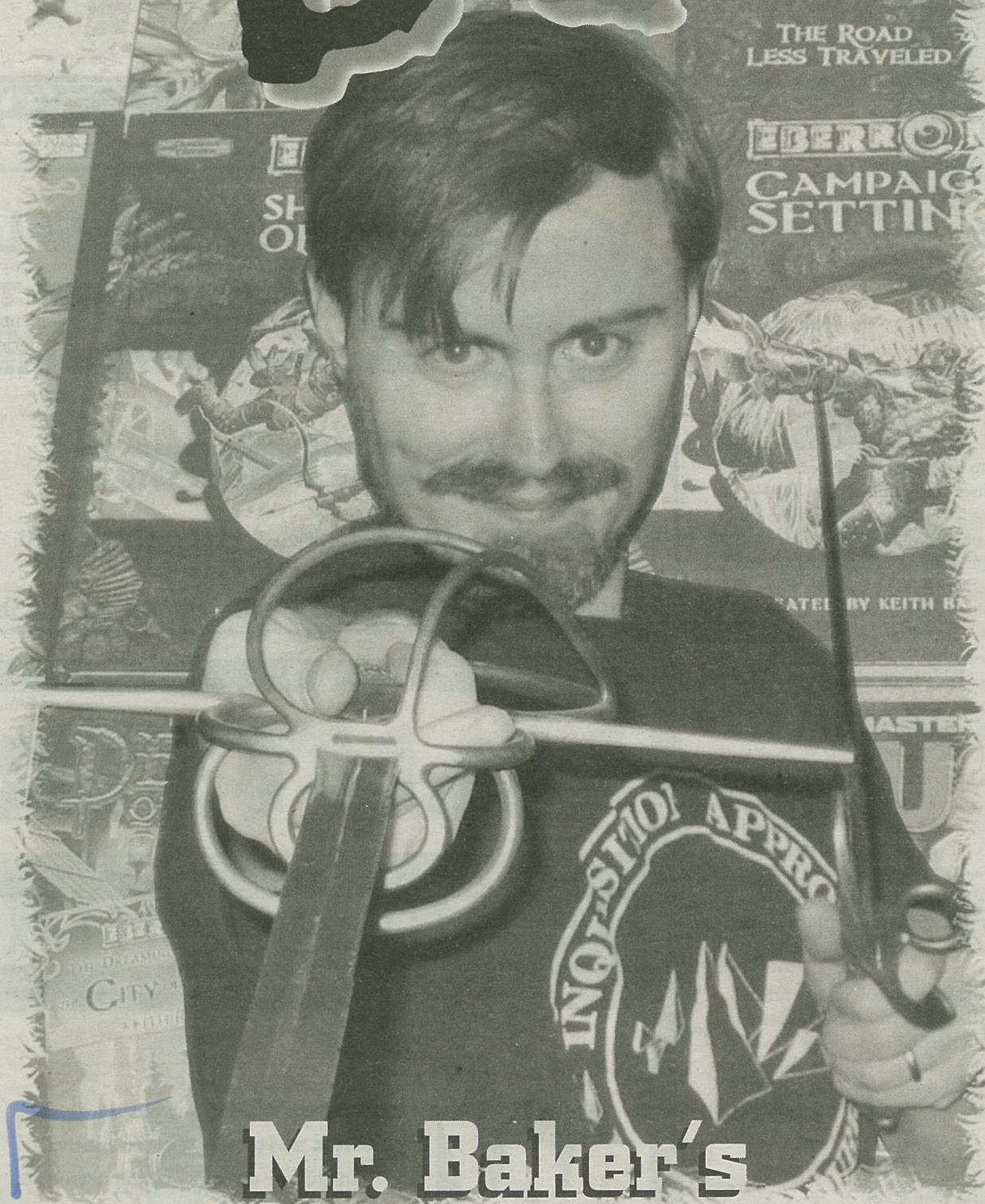
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# Mr. Baker's neighborhood

*He is the mastermind behind the new world of Dungeons and Dragons and author of a new fantasy novel. Keith Baker gives the B-dub's resident geeks an insider's tour of Eberron.*

*by Vince Darcangelo*

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**VETERANS FOR COMMON SENSE**

veteransforcommonsense.org

## Web watch

**It takes more than yellow ribbons**

<http://www.veteransforcommonsense.org/files/vcs/guide.cfm>

In our Feb. 17 edition, Joel "J-dub" Warner documented the tragic effects of the antimalarial drug Lariam on two U.S. soldiers returning from Iraq. Sadly, this story illustrates that the U.S. government isn't as concerned with the well-being of our soldiers as the B-dub. But the B-dub is not alone. Veterans for Common Sense is also taking on the task of offering education, resources and support to returning soldiers at [www.veteransforcommonsense.org/files/vcs/guide.cfm](http://www.veteransforcommonsense.org/files/vcs/guide.cfm).

This online guide, soon to be in print form, provides resources regarding health issues, employment issues, benefits and records and other topics. They also have a section on how nonmilitary folks can support our troops abroad, including links to Adopt-a-Platoon and Books for Soldiers.

You know the B-dub is against this war for oil in Iraq. We supported the troops by fighting to keep them from deployment. As victims themselves of the Bush administration, the returning soldiers need our support now more than ever. 2

—Vince Darcangelo

Respond: [letters@boulderweekly.com](mailto:letters@boulderweekly.com)



**I**t is said that anything is possible in post-war Sharn, the City of Towers. The survivors of both the Mourning and the fall of the Cyran army are a weary lot—desperate, on edge—so the hooded figure on the bridge could be a harmless beggar or something more sinister. It's hard to discern through a heavy rain that batters the ghettos of Sharn like a post-apocalyptic tsunami. Only blue, rippling shadows are distinguishable through the downpour. I step forward, but Rael, the wise Valenar elf, places a cautious hand on my shoulder.

*"Hold up, Dymus," she says. "Something's not right."*

*I look to Kesht. The young priest shares my puzzled gaze.*

*"There are two people up ahead," says Rael. "I think one is in trouble."*

*We advance carefully, taking short, quiet steps until we catch sight of a body lying motionless at the feet of the hooded figure. A pool of water drifts away from the body. It flows red with blood.*

*The hooded figure turns and approaches our party.*

*I draw my sword, as does Kesht. Rael raises her longbow and locks the dark character in her sights. In the once-proud city of Sharn you learn to act quickly if you wish to survive. Details come later.*

*We don't wait to learn the approaching figure's intent.*

*Rael pulls the taut string of her bow, steadies her aim and fires. The missile slices through the pouring rain. I can't see if it hits its mark, but through the downpour comes a sharp, metallic pang.*

*The hooded figure drops to one knee.*

Keith Baker's Boulder home is a fantasy geek's paradise. An oversized bookshelf serves as an archive of role-playing game (RPG) modules, player's handbooks and monster manuals. Posters of fantasy artwork grace the walls. Intricately designed miniatures of majestic dragons, mythical creatures and timeless warriors stand guard over counter space. Two broadswords hang over a mantle, and if you ask nicely Baker will give you a lesson in swordplay. After all, prior to becoming a novelist and game designer, he studied fencing and worked at Renaissance fairs.

If you knew Baker as a child, you probably wouldn't be surprised.

"Instead of playing Cowboys and Indians, I ran around with friends playing Egyptian and Norse gods," he says.

After showing an early interest in mythology, fantasy, the horror/sci-fi fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and the eerie artwork of Edward Gorey, it was no surprise that in 4th grade Baker became interested in a game called Dungeons & Dragons (D&D).

For those who missed the fundamentalist crusades and the music videos of Ronnie James Dio in the '80s, D&D is an RPG dating back to the early '70s in which

players role-play as characters in a medieval fantasy world where dragons and magic are real. Players team up in campaigns that involve fighting enemies, collecting treasure and completing tasks (featuring a life currency of "hit points" that is used in most modern video games). As players' characters progress, they advance in level, and with each level comes new and unique challenges. There is no board—the campaign takes place in the players' imagination, where the victors of battle are determined by a roll of the dice. And unlike a video game, D&D encourages intellectual interaction among players, and the possibilities of game direction are boundless.

In 2000, Wizards of the Coast, publishers of D&D, released a third edition of the game, which hadn't been revised since 1989. And in 2004, Wizards of the Coast introduced a new campaign setting, a full-scale world in which new D&D adventures would be based: Eberron—a world created by grown up and still fantasy-obsessed Keith Baker.

*The hooded figure turns out to be a warforged soldier—a creature that had been created to fight in the Last War, but now finds itself without a purpose. It holds a book in one hand, a bloody axe in the other.*

*We approach it carefully, weapons drawn.*

*Suddenly, a child appears on the other side of the bridge and screams. The warforged rises to its feet. It pulls a second axe from its waist and towers over me, weapons raised high.*

*"This does not concern you," it says with a booming, metallic voice. "One chance to leave."*

*Instead, I raise my sword and swing at the bastard with all I've got. The hilt is slick with rain, and it nearly slips from my fingers. But my blade finds its mark with a strong, swift rattle. Stunned and battered, the warforged stumbles backward, dropping both axes along with the mysterious book. Rael fires another arrow. The warforged falls to the ground. I move in to finish it off, but before I can a mechanical nodule on its chest sprouts wings and flies away from the broken frame. It glides over the railing of the bridge and down, flying deeper into the grisly slums of the City of Towers.*

*We look back across the bridge, but the screaming child has gone. Was he ever there? Two bodies lie at our feet. A relentless, freezing rain is soaking through our armor, chilling us and drenching our belongings. Everything around us is coated*

*with wet, sticky blood. I retrieve the stolen book from the fallen warforged. I'm startled to find that it's bone dry. Even more surprising, its pages are blank.*

**B**aker seems an unassuming man at first, friendly, perhaps a bit hyperactive. He is thin, wears glasses and sports a tight beard and brown, somewhat-ruffled hair combed smoothly to the right. Sara, Joel and I join him and his wife, Ellen, in the living room of their Boulder home, where said stacks of game modules and implements of impalement elicit high praise. We are experienced in the ways of dragon-slaying—

all of us were "gamers" (the term by which D&D players affectionately refer to themselves) in our younger days. It's been more than a decade since I've played regularly—the same for Joel. But Sara is a current gamer, with a future campaign partner growing inside her belly. (I'm referring to the fact that she's pregnant, not to some magical, game-related spawn spell, for all you wizards out there.)

With our Ph.Ds in dungeon ass-kicking, Baker is introducing us to his world the best possible way—through an old-fashioned, take-no-prisoners D&D campaign. Sara is Rael, a ranger of the Valenar elves. Her people betrayed Cyre near the end of the Last War, but she has turned her back on them and continues to serve Cyre. Joel is Kesht, a warrior-priest of the Sovereign Host, once part of the Southern Command of Cyre. I am Dymus Deneith, a monk-fighter. I bear the Dragonmark of Sentinel.

Easily taking on the role of "dungeon master," or DM—the "referee" who serves as arbitrator, antagonist and storyteller during a campaign—Baker guides us through a quest of his own design, into the world of Eberron. Through his ability to control game-play, talent at adopting voices and his wild enthusiasm, we quickly realize that Baker is neither unassuming nor hyperactive. He is intense, theatrical and passionate about his pursuits, be that playing D&D; creating a card game, Gloom (released last fall); writing his first novel, *The City of Towers: The Dreaming Dark Book I*; or creating an entire freaking universe in which gamers can play.

Baker leads us to a dark corner of that universe known as Sharn, the City of Towers, the setting of his debut book.

*It could be a knock at the door of our room. Just as easily, it could be another crack of thunder (the storm had lasted well into the night). It also could be the lingering lucidity of a dream, for the deadly battle with the warforged had cycled through my mind all night, disrupting my sleep.*

*I hear the thud again and sit up and reach for my sword. Kesht already has his drawn. Rael, the cool-headed Valenar elf, motions us at ease. It could be anything, but it is only a knock at the door.*

*"You have a visitor," says the innkeeper. "A woman from the House Cannith."*

*The mysterious woman is elegantly dressed in an ornate blue cloak too stylish for this part of the city. She has dark hair with red highlights, royal, if*

tragic, blue eyes, a regal manner. She introduces herself as Lady Elaydren. She wears a ring bearing the signet of Cannith.

"I am looking for an artifact," she says. "I was expecting to receive it from Gelder—the scholar that was murdered on the bridge last night. I understand you were there?"

Rael cautiously nods her head.

"I'm looking for a book," Lady Elaydren continues. "Did you happen to find one?"

Kesht rolls his eyes. I kick at the dirt with my boot. Rael begins to speak, but stops.

After scanning our expressions, Lady Elaydren lets out a soft, proud sigh.

"Well then, I have gold," she says. "But without the journal, I have no expedition to fund. Please do think back to last night. If you recall anything, I frequent the Grey Dragon Tavern. If I only had that journal, well..."

She turns and exits the courtyard.

Some hours later, we meet Lady Elaydren at the Grey Dragon with journal in hand. The signet on the book matches that on her ring. When put together, they both glow with a royal magic.

Lady Elaydren offers us a deal that will send us in search of a seven-pointed star 57 levels below the sewer in an old foundry. We

came to Sharn in search of adventure and treasure, so we accept.

"Keep an eye out," she says as we are leaving the tavern. "It is always possible there will be more agents of the Lord of Blades, if that is, indeed, who you are dealing with."

As he guides us through a world of his making, Baker fills us in on how the campaign we're undertaking came into existence. Prior to creating Eberron, Baker had done freelance writing, often for less traditional pulp adventure RPGs. Then in 2002, Wizards of the Coast issued an open call for a new world in which to base campaigns. Baker came up with Eberron, incorporating many pulp devices into the traditional D&D schema.

"I thought, 'What if you took that pulp tone and applied it to the fantasy setting instead of the '30s,'" says Baker.

The result is a world that Baker describes as "Lord of the Rings meets Indiana Jones and The Maltese Falcon." In essence, a film noir in a fantasy RPG setting.

Wizards of the Coast liked the idea, and chose Baker, and Eberron, out of 11,000 entrants—awarding Baker \$100,000.

The creation of particular worlds for gaming has always been an important component of D&D culture. Since the game's inception, writers have developed unique and original settings in

which players base their campaigns. The first was Greyhawk, a world concocted by D&D creator Gary Gygax. The second edition of D&D featured such popular settings as Forgotten Realms and Dragonlance.

For Eberron, Baker wanted to increase the level of sophistication of game-play without losing the adventurous appeal that gamers love.

"Let's take what is in D&D—magic, fantasy, etc.—and apply it to a world as we've applied science and technology to ours," says Baker. "D&D has all these monsters... We needed to create a world where they were there, but we wanted to create a world where we explain why they're there."

To do this, Baker took the notion of magic, an essential ingredient of D&D game-play, and incorporated it into the society of Eberron in such a way that it is not an anomaly or mysterious power so much as it is a physical reality that Eberron's inhabitants have attempted to harness to improve their lives.

"It's trying to take what does exist in D&D and say, 'Instead of technology we use magic,'" says Baker. "People are comfortable with magic. People apply it as they would technology."

But despite better living through hocus-pocus, there is still plenty of fresh meat for the hack-and-slash style of gamer, like myself. Baker just wants there to be an explanation from whence the meat came. Gone are the

days of a random castle in the middle of a forest with neither rhyme nor reason to explain its presence. Gone are the oversized monsters in desolate settings that couldn't possibly sate their hefty appetites. Oh, the castles and dragons are still there. Don't worry. It's just that in Eberron, everything has a backstory.

*On the surface, the war ended two years ago. But when you go underground, into these dark, subterranean depths, you see a war is still being fought. There are no armies, no sides, no objective more noble than self-preservation. But in these impoverished sewers, battle is waged constantly. To the victor, survival—the right to live, and fight, another day.*

*The lighting is as dim as the hope down here; sputtering torches offer spare illumination. It's difficult to see far ahead or behind. The sound of rushing water surrounds us, flowing through the walls, above us, below. The carrion smell is intolerable. I focus my thoughts on the promise of treasure to keep from turning around and heading back to the surface.*

*For a small fee we acquire the services of a guide. He's underage, but cheap. The goblin child leads us through a twisting maze of granite and filth, in search of our destination. The rolling gush of water grows louder the deeper we tread into the tunnels. Finally, the child leads us to*

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a flat stone wall. The only way forward is to the right—into a river of fetid, brown waste.

Kesht takes the lead, inching knee-deep into the sewer water. He steps into a shadow. I follow, but no sooner have I entered the murky stream than I notice a warforged soldier lurking in the darkness.

"Kesht!" I yell, but a moment too late.

The warforged drives its axe between his ribs. Kesht howls in pain and drops into the water.

"Give me the book," the warforged bellows.

Kesht is slumped and retching into the sewer. I dive through the space between him and the creature, deftly avoiding a quick attack. I raise my sword and swing wildly at the enemy... but miss.

There is the sound of footsteps crashing through water at the far end of the tunnel. I turn to find two large, hairy beasts charging toward us. Feral shifters. Two dry platforms flank the sewer between the shifters and us. In the other direction is a grate. Our only shot at surviving this ambush is to get to the platforms and fight on dry ground.

But first we have to deal with the warforged, which has raised its axe for another strike.

"Give me the book," it hollers again.

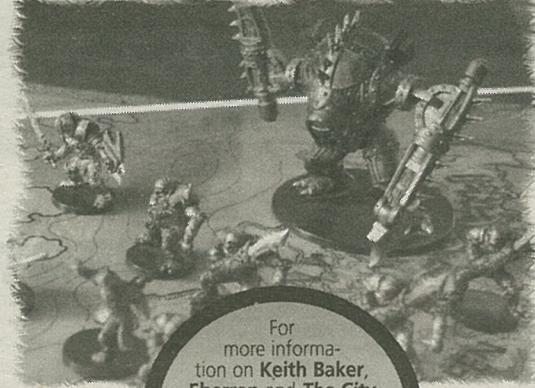
Rael attacks with her scimitar, but

loses her footing in the water. She misses her mark. Kesht struggles to his knees and swipes at the warforged with his longsword. He does minimal damage

but at least disrupts the enemy's attack. I charge the beast, striking with a two-handed deathblow. The shot lands clean. The warforged falls backward against the grate, then slides motionless into the murky water.

**B**aker is as savvy as he is talented. When he developed Eberron, he wasn't just creating a campaign setting. He was creating a franchise, something he could develop and expand. Last month Baker released his first novel, *The City of Towers*, which is set in Eberron and details many of the events and creatures that gamers will encounter in their campaigns. It is the first part of a trilogy, and the first book in the career of a budding novelist who, at the age of 35, has already garnered much success. Baker has published numerous RPG modules, a novel, a card game and did some of the scriptwriting

Derek Greene



For more information on Keith Baker, Eberron and *The City of Towers*, visit [www.bossthecow.com](http://www.bossthecow.com) or [www.wizards.com](http://www.wizards.com).

trying to break into the RPG business.

"I've always known what I wanted to do," says Baker. "I just didn't know how I was going to do it."

Ultimately, it was part talent, part creativity and part passion.

"I just wrote [Eberron] because I thought it was a fun idea," says Baker. "I think that's why they liked it, because of the passion and energy."

*Before we can tend to Kesht's wounds, we must deal with the feral shifters—who've grown mighty claws and are closing in fast. Rael raises her bow and fires, striking one. Kesht raises his sword and swings at the other. He makes contact, but opens himself to a counterattack. The shifter slashes him with its claw. As Kesht struggles for balance, the shifter raises its claw to strike again. I rush to Kesht's aid, but can't reach*

for the much-anticipated online RPG *Everquest II*.

Not bad for someone who worked in coffee shops, bookstores and the video-game industry while

him in time.

Then suddenly a valve opens, allowing a thick wave of sewage into the tunnel that levels everything in its path—including Kesht and the shifter. For the moment Kesht is spared, but critically wounded. Rael pierces the other shifter with repeated trajectories from her longbow, taking its life.

I close in on the remaining shifter. It raises its arms in surrender, but seeing I intend no mercy, the hairy beast attempts to flee down the tunnel.

Not so fast, Chewbacca.

I fire my crossbow, nailing the shifter in the back of the leg and dropping it into the brown goop. It cries into the water as Rael and I approach. I press my longsword to its neck, then raise it high above my head. The shifter pleads for its life. It is not spared.

We gather ourselves on a dry platform, away from the sewage and the carnage of battle. We are battered, but not defeated. The ancient and mysterious book is still in our possession, but our quest is not complete. More adversaries await—more treasure, more adventure. We tend to each other's wounds, catch our breath and plot our next course.

We steel our resolve, and press on through the ruins. **Z**

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