



Tom Morrissey has just released a new book, *Turn Four*, and he used an AlphaSmart 3000 and Dana as part of his writing process, as he has for other books.

Tom is an avid deep and technical scuba diver, an accomplished mountaineer, a second-degree black belt in RyokuKai karate, a "student pilot since forever," a marksman and an archer, and his books reflect his headfirst-out-the-window attitude toward life. He's also spent a fair amount of time in academe, with an MA in English from the University of Toledo, and an MFA in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University. His first novel *Yucatan Deep* was a finalist for the 2003 Christy Award, and he will have two new novels coming out with Harper Collins: Zondervan in 2005.

Email Interview with Tom Morrissey conducted by Richard Wanderman in early September, 2004

Tom, can you give us a timeline: when you started writing, when you started using electronic tools in your writing, and when and how you discovered AlphaSmart products?

I remember going to a career-day assembly at my junior-high school when I was twelve. It was the first time I ever gave a thought to what I might do with my life and, even though we didn't hear from any mountain climbers or writers that day, I walked out of there determined that I was going to be either a mountain climber or an author. Later I discovered that the mountain-climbing gig didn't pay that well, so I crossed it off my list, and that left only one career choice.

As far as acting on that impulse, I was in college before I did so. And I did it because I was broke and I wanted to take (tah-dah!) a rock-climbing class, and I figured that, if I had an assignment to do a magazine story, then the climbing shop would give me the course for free. So I stopped in to see the editor of the newspaper's Sunday magazine, and told him what I wanted to do, and showed him some clippings from my college-newspaper writing, and he was kind enough to give me a shot at it. That was in 1976, and my story, "On the Rocks," which appeared in the Toledo Blade Sunday Magazine, was the first piece of writing I ever got paid for. Within two years I had been published by Popular Science, and my first book, *Twenty American Peaks and Craggs*, was published by Contemporary Books. The subject in both cases was climbing, so I guess that dream was still with me.

I began writing with electronic tools in 1983. My first computer was a KayPro III, which ran on a now-defunct OS called CP/M. Oddly enough,

that didn't make any quantum changes in my writing technique, as the word-processing program was key-command based and I, being the kind of person who doesn't read instruction manuals, used the KayPro like a typewriter, backing up the cursor to overwrite things I wanted to change (sort of like electronic correction fluid). About the same time, I began working as a writer with an ad agency that had a Wang word processing system, and I started discovering that I could move things around, cut-and-paste and so forth. I began composing on the Wang, which my fellow writers at the agency thought of as odd, because they viewed it as a secretarial tool.

But I think it was WordPerfect and WYSIWYG word-processing that really created that "Aha!" moment for me. Once I understood how easy it was to change things, I began to just lay words on the screen and worry about coming back and making it pretty later. Previously, I had done what I imagine every writer since Moses had done -- I spent a lot of time thinking before I sat down to write, because once it was on paper, I was committed (I still did rewrites in the typewriter days, but not as many). Word processing freed me to flow and encouraged me to polish. It made me a much better writer.

I discovered the AlphaSmart 3000 when a friend of mine, who was writing for *Writer's Digest*, suggested that I do a piece for the magazine, and I sat down with a copy to look at it (I hadn't read *Writer's Digest* for years). I saw an ad for the AlphaSmart 3000 and instantly saw that it was sort of the electronic equivalent of a Flair pen and a yellow legal pad (which is how I often did first drafts and notes in my typewriter days) -- easily transportable, instantly available (no boot up) and ultra dependable with that 700-hour battery life. And it was so inexpensive, I couldn't come up with a reason not to try it. So I got one, and later discovered that something like a third of my novelist friends also do their first drafts on an AlphaSmart.

What is your typical writing process? How do you currently use the AlphaSmart and Dana in your process?

My first drafts are written (and moderately modified) on my AlphaSmart 3000. I hate being anchored in one place when I compose my fiction, and I love the fact that I can take the AlphaSmart anywhere, even outdoors in bright sunlight, and still see the screen. With eight files, I can work on several chapters at once, which is great when you are working with involved plot twists that require foreshadowing and planting clues in the earlier chapters. Once I get about 4-5000 words in a file, I "send" it to a master manuscript in MicroSoft Word in my PC, and copy it onto both a JumpDrive and an SD card. Now I have a safety copy in my PC and the JumpDrive, and a working copy on the SD card.

I then do my rewrites and editing on that SD card (backing up to the PC and JumpDrive daily), using Documents to Go in my Dana Wireless. Documents to Go supports a native MicroSoft Word format, so no conversion is necessary-- the card can go back and forth seamlessly between the Dana and the PC (I almost never sync my Dana, as card-reader transfer is so much faster).

I can edit in my Dana right up to the point that I send my manuscript to my editor. At that point, the manuscript will start to sprout embedded comments as we work on it and e-mail it back and forth, and in the version I have, Documents to Go does not support embedded comments, which is understandable, as it is a Palm 4.0 app, and not a full-fledged piece of PC software. So from that point on, I am working with my PC, which may be why I hate editing so much -- it's not that I dislike the work, but I miss the freedom and mobility of my AS 3000 and my Dana. I own a state-of-the-art notebook computer, but given the battery time, the weight, the lengthy boot-up and the poor readability of the screen in sunlight ... it is a poor substitute for my Dana when it comes to my personal writing style!

You are a moderator in the AlphaSmart Community. Can you comment on that experience: how helpful it has been to you to have a community, meeting other writers there, etc.

You know, a local university has been pestering me to take an intern for years now, and I've always refused, telling them, "What could they possibly learn by watching a guy sit in a chair, stare out the window, and peck at a keyboard all day?" ... Because writing can be a tremendously isolating life. Community (and other Internet experiences, such as the novelists' board I belong to) gives me a socialization outlet without equiring a drive into town.

Early on in my learning curve, I also found Community invaluable for giving me tips on how to better use my AlphaSmart 3000 and Dana (did I mention I don't read manuals?).

Professionally, I've probably done more mentoring than I've received in Community, but that's fine. I believe that I have an obligation to help grow other artists -- if I keep what I've learned to myself, the world of writing is not enlarged and I'm just being selfish. So, professionally, Community is a tool for sharing.

And for my family, the educational component of Community became a real boon when it became a resource for homeschooling my ADHD/dyslexic/dysgraphic daughter. I got her an AlphaSmart 3000 and it

literally changed her life -- showed her that she is extremely bright and intuitive, and gave her a gateway for creativity with the hurdle of hand-forming characters removed. She and I are currently working on a book together.

The worldwide nature of Community is another plus. I have friends in at least six different countries, and that often comes in handy. Recently, I needed two lines of German dialogue in my work-in-progress, and I enlisted the help of two German Community members. So there's always something happening in Community. "Today's Active Topics" is something I check every morning when I log onto the 'Net.

What do you think (so far as you've heard and read) of the new AlphaSmart Neo?

Neo is proof that AlphaSmart listens to customers. They kept the things we loved about the AlphaSmart 3000 (simplicity, battery life, the don't-review-keep-writing brevity of the screen size) and added things we wanted (Dana-like keys, more memory and tools for writers). I have one coming my way, and I am sitting by the window, humming that tune from The Music Man, "Oh the Wells Fargo man, he's just a coming down the street; I hope he has something for me..."

What would your ideal electronic writing tool be like? If you had the AlphaSmart engineering group's ear, what would you tell them to build next?

I distinguish between writing and editing, much the way a musician may distinguish between, say a piano (for composing upon) and a symphony orchestra (for fleshing out the finished work). As such, I kind of like having different tools for the two different processes, and Neo may be perilously close to perfect as a first-draft device. One thing I might like to see in a future AlphaSmart is an electronic-ink screen, provided that technology matures to the point where it has a practical refresh rate (E-ink screens today tend to be a tad slow). I also always put glare-resistant protectors on my screens, and if AlphaSmart did that at the factory, I'm sure they'd do a better job than I do.

For Dana, if there was a way to view comments in Documents to Go, that would let me extend my on-Dana editing time. But I'm not sure how you'd do that. Comments consume screen real estate, and I certainly wouldn't want Dana's screen to be bigger. And again, when the technology gets there, give Dana an electronic-ink screen and send the prototype to me for beta-testing, please! In the meantime, just keep building great products!