

# The BiblioFiles: Brandon Sanderson

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

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DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. My guest is Brandon Sanderson, author of the Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarian series. The premise of the series is simple. Everything you know is a lie. Evil librarians control the world, feeding us false information, like physics, to keep us complacent and blissfully ignorant. The veil is lifted forever the day our hero, orphan Alcatraz Smedry, turns 13.

Alcatraz, a self-proclaimed liar, coward, and deviant with a talent for breaking things, receives a bag of sand from his long lost parents. The sands lead him to a new world, a world where Occulators, members of the royal Smedry family, and the Knights of Crystallia do battle with evil, sword-wielding librarians with taped glasses. Narrated by the unreliable Alcatraz, the books are hilarious, innovative, and infinitely clever, taking all the familiar concepts you know, twisting them, and then presenting them in a completely new light, with plenty of swords, explosions, battles, traps, and dinosaurs with English accents thrown in. Mr. Sanderson joins us from Provo, Utah. Brandon Sanderson, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

BRANDON SANDERSON: Thank you.

DR. DANA: So everything we know is a lie spun by evil, sword-wielding librarians in a world where arriving late to things, breaking things, and getting lost are actually considered to be talents. Authors, I know, are often asked where do you get the idea for your book, but the world in your book is so cleverly contrary, I'm just going to ask. How did you create this alternative universe?

BRANDON SANDERSON: Well, it came from several places. It is difficult to trace precisely where an idea starts and where a book comes together because, for me, a book is just a conglomeration of a dozen or more different ideas that ram together into one another and just start sticking together. And the more ideas that stick together, the more essential it becomes for me to write that book. It demands that it be written as I make connections and as things just start to work.

When I was planning the Alcatraz books, I'd for a long time been wanting to write a middle grade or young adult novel, something themed a little bit younger than what I've been working on before. I'm mostly known for my epic fantasy books, and I had been writing a series called Mistborn, which is a trilogy of epic fantasy novels. And my goal with that series was to get through the entire trilogy, get it all written in draft form, before the first one had to be turned in, so I've been pushing really hard to get through that series. And after I finished the second of

those books-- and these are monstrous books, epic fantasy. We like the big door-stopper type novels that are so thick that they take up the shelf space of three or four other books.

After I finished two of these, my brain was just screaming at me, I can't do this anymore. We need to do something else. I decided I needed to take a break. I just needed to do something else.

Now, when I was working on these, it was actually at the height of the Da Vinci Code fervor. I'd read the book, but as much as I admired some things about the book, I was a little bit put off by this whole concept of the evil society that secretly rules the world. It's a mainstay of thrillers as that genre, but I'm just not one who believes in the conspiracy theories and this sort of thing. And so an idea began itching at me to write a ridiculous conspiracy theory book, something that was so crazy that it made mockery of the entire concept.

Yet at the same time, I had been working on this long epic fantasy series, and I love those books. I love writing them, but one thing about epic fantasy is it's very-- self-important is the wrong word. It takes itself very seriously. Everything must be in-world and cohesive. Like when you're reading Tolkien, there are no asides. Everything is very serious, and parts of history are very real to the characters and these sorts of things.

And I'd been doing this so much that I needed to do something, honestly, that made fun of myself at the same time, something that was completely different, and so I ended up writing this book called *Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians*. The Evil Librarians part came because I wanted something that was ridiculous, and yet the best satire and parody has just this hint, well, it could be true or could be proven. And librarians do control information in a way. I'm a reader, in part, because of great librarians who handed me the right books, who were feeding me information. And for me, fantasy novels are what did it for me.

Literacy specialists, in particular, have this chance to give the right books and the right information, and where there's power like that, there's the opportunity for the power to be abused, particularly in a ridiculous way. And so the evil librarians, the idea that librarians secretly rule the world, grew out of that mixed with me wanting to do a fun fantasy novel. And so I wanted to have people in these books who had magical powers that were ridiculous, yet fun at the same time.

Actually, the theme for the magic in the books were stupid things that I do, and so I wanted all the dumb stuff I do to become super powers instead. So Alcatraz, early in the book, discovers his grandfather shows up, and he meets his grandfather the first time. And his grandfather explains I have this really powerful super talent, this magical ability that's hereditary, and it's the ability to arrive late to appointments, which is something that I consistently do. Alcatraz is, of course, like that's stupid.

DR. DANA: Actually, I'd like to ask you that, because Alcatraz has been shuttled from foster home to foster home because he accidentally breaks things. He breaks doorknobs, computer keyboards, figurines, sidewalk pavement, chickens, entire kitchens, walls of houses. So he learns that this is actually a talent.

You started to tell us about the talents, but of course, I want to hear more about them because they're so unusual, arriving late to things, breaking things, getting really lost, waking up ugly in the mornings. These are not magical powers. These are things that get everyone in trouble in this world. So how did you pick those and decide to twist them around?

BRANDON SANDERSON: When I was a kid, I really was only good at one thing, and that was daydreaming. I was a big daydreamer. I would just sit and stare at the wall instead of paying attention to the things I was supposed to be doing, and it got me in quite a bit of trouble. Well, not quite a bit. I was never a really troubled kid, but I was getting C's in school because I just wasn't paying attention and stuff like this.

When I discovered the fantasy genre-- I wasn't reader when I was young. A lot of kids are, but I wasn't. For whatever reason, it misfired for me. The books that people handed me were the wrong type of books.

I make fun of this a little bit in the Alcatraz books because I was given a-- seems that there's a period in my life where every book someone gave me involved some boy with a pet dog, and you knew the dog was going to die. And so why am I going to read this book where I know this dog is going to die? And plus I'm living in Nebraska. I'm living in the city, but it's kind of a rural area.

I'm not really interested. I know what it's like to live there. I don't want to read about that, and so I thought that reading was boring until I had a teacher in eighth grade who handed me a fantasy novel. And I read this thing--

DR. DANA: Which one was it?

BRANDON SANDERSON: --and it blew my mind. What novel?

DR. DANA: Yes.

BRANDON SANDERSON: It was Dragonsbane by Barbara Hambly. Getting back to the original question, though, where did these talents come from? They came from me being a kid and doing something that got me in trouble, and when I read that fantasy novel, I realized, hey, these people are doing what I do. They're daydreaming, and they made a job out of it. It's really what fantasy writers do, is we daydream, and then people pay us for it.

It's this incredible thing that all of us worry that, someday, the world is going to wake up and say, wait a minute, we're paying these people to daydream. Let's make them get a real job. But I wrote the Alcatraz books wanting to say let's look at things that I do that can get me in trouble, or things that kids do that get them in trouble, or just people in general. If we can take these extreme examples and turn them on their head, maybe it'll show that, a lot of times, some things we do, it depends on how we look at them. Pieces of our personality, adapted certain ways, get us in trouble, but looked at completely different ways can be sources of greatness.

If we look at the personality flaw of being arrogant, for instance-- well, arrogance is this terrible flaw. We don't like it, but its twin is self-confidence, which is kind of the same thing. And without self-confidence, it's really hard to succeed in a lot of careers in this world. It depends on how you use it.

So I wanted to write a book that was like that. Alcatraz breaks things. It's exaggerated. It works very well for the kids, though. When I talk to them, I say, OK, breaking stuff. That's terrible, right?

And then they say, yeah. But then I say, yeah, what if you're tied up, and you can break the ropes? Or Grandpa Smedry, yeah, arriving late to someone's birthday party is a bad thing. Arriving late when someone shoots a bullet at you, so you get there just a little too late for the bullet to hit, that's a good thing.

DR. DANA: So do you have a Smedry talent?

BRANDON SANDERSON: I definitely have a Smedry talent. Daydreaming would be the one that I usually answer when kids ask me, but most of these things come from me. Arriving late to stuff is something I do. Breaking stuff is actually more what my mom does. I stole a lot of these from people I know. I'm writing the fourth book right now, where the new Smedry talent someone has is that they're really bad at math.

DR. DANA: Oh, I have that one.

BRANDON SANDERSON: She is bad at math, and so they'll look around the corner, and there'll be two guards standing by one door and two guards by the other door. And they say to her, OK, two guards plus two guards, how many is that? And she'll be like, three. And then they look back, and one of them has vanished. I guess being bad at math can change the way the universe works, the way that she perceives it.

DR. DANA: I'm wondering if you might be willing to read a passage from the first book in the series, *Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarian*.

BRANDON SANDERSON: I would love to.

DR. DANA: In this passage, Alcatraz is about to cross the threshold into this new world, the one that's hiding underneath the librarian controlled world. Up to this point, Alcatraz has been dubious that this world, this new world, really exists. He's just been rescued from his former foster home by his grandfather, Grandpa Smedry, and they're about to enter Grandpa Smedry's secret fortress.

BRANDON SANDERSON: "The vehicle pulled up to the pumps at a small gas station. I didn't recognize the brand-- the sign hanging above the ridiculously high prices simply depicted the image of an upside-down teddy bear.

Our doors swung open on their own. Grandpa hopped out of his seat and rushed over to meet the station attendant, who was approaching to fill up the tank.

I frowned, still sitting in the car. The attendant was dressed in a pair of dirty overalls and no shirt. He was chewing on the end of the piece of straw, as one might see a farmer doing in old Hushlander movies, and he had on a large straw hat.

Grandpa Smedry approached the man with an exaggerated look of nonchalance. 'Hello, good sir,' Grandpa Smedry said, glancing around. 'I'd like a Philip, please.'

'Of course, good sir,' the attendant said, tipping his hat and accepting a couple of bills from Grandpa Smedry. The attendant approached the car, nodding to me, then took out one of the gasoline hoses and held it up to the side of the car. There was, I noticed, no sign of the gas tank. The attendant stood happily, gas hose pressed uselessly against the side of the car, whistling pleasantly to himself.

'Come, Alcatraz!' Grandpa Smedry said, walking up to the gas station's store. 'There isn't time!'

Finally, I just shook my head and climbed out of the car. Grandpa Smedry went inside, the screen door slamming behind him. I walked up, pulling open the screen door-- threw the door handle over my shoulder as it broke off-- then step inside after Grandpa Smedry.

Another attendant-- also with a straw in his mouth and a large hat on his head-- stood leaning against counter. The small 'store' consisted of a single stand of snacks and a wall-sized cooler. The cooler was stocked completely with cans of motor oil, though a sign said ENJOY A COOL REFRESHING DRINK!

'Okay,' I said, 'where exactly are you people finding straw to chew on in the middle of the city? It can't be all that easy to get.'

'Quickly, now. Quickly!' Grandpa Smedry gestured frantically from the back of the store. Glancing to either side, he said in a louder voice, 'I think I'll have a cool refreshing drink!' Then he pulled open the cooler door.

I froze in place.

Now, it's very important to me that you understand that I am not stupid. It's perfectly all right if you end this book convinced that I'm not the hero that some reports claim me to be. However, I'd rather not everyone I meet presume me to be slow-witted. If that were the case, half of them would likely try and sell me insurance.

The truth is, however, that even clever people can be taken by surprise so soundly that they are at a loss for words. Or, at least, at a loss for words that make sense.

'Gak!' I said.

You see. Now, before you judge me, place yourself in my position. Let's say that you had watched a crazy old man open up a cooler full of oilcans. You would have undoubtedly expected to see... well, a cooler full of oilcans on the other side.

You would *not* expect to see a room with a large hearth at the center, blazing with a cheery reddish-orange fire. You would not expect to see two men in full armor standing guard on either side of the door. Indeed, you would not expect to see a room-- instead of a cooler full of oilcans-- at all.

Perhaps you would have said 'Gak' too.

'Gak!' I repeated.

'Would you stop that, boy?' Grandpa Smedry said. 'There are absolutely *no* Gaks here. Why do you think we have to keep so much straw around? Now, come on!' He stepped through the doorway into the room beyond.

I approached slowly, then glanced at the other side of the open glass door-- and saw oilcans cooling in the wall racks. I turned, looking through the doorway. It seemed as if I could see much more than I should have been able to. The two knights standing on either side of such a small doorway should have left no room to walk through, yet Grandpa Smedry had passed easily.

I reached out, rapping lightly on one of the knight's breastplates.

'Please don't do that,' a voice said from behind the faceplate.

'Oh,' I said. 'Um, sorry.' Still frowning to myself, I stepped into the room."

DR. DANA: I've always been tempted to do that whenever I've encountered a suit of armor.

BRANDON SANDERSON: Yeah. It's like making faces at the guards at Buckingham Palace and things like that, just something that everyone has a deep seated desire to do.

DR. DANA: So Alcatraz not only discovers that he's part of the royal Smedry family, he also discovers that he is an Occulator. Can you tell us what an Occulator is?

BRANDON SANDERSON: I can. As I talked about earlier, these books came from my desire to write a story about people who had magical talents kind of like a dumb things that I do, and one of the things that had been bouncing around in my head for a while was a magic system based on glasses. I have worn glasses since I was very young, and I can remember that day when I first was given glasses. I was maybe six or seven, and I didn't want to get glasses. I knew people got made fun of for wearing glasses, and I was all against it.

And my parents took me down, and we did the whole eye test thing. And I kept protesting I don't need glasses. Why are we getting glasses? And then eventually, I was given the glasses, and I put them on. And I can remember looking at a tree and saying I can see the leaves.

To me, trees were just fuzzy things of green. The whole world changed to me. Thomas Aquinas called the invention of spectacles the greatest invention in the history of mankind, in his opinion. In that moment, it was certainly the greatest invention for me because the world opened up to me.

When I was writing these books, the idea of information being more powerful than weapons became much of a theme. I mean, we've got the librarians, and we've got the librarians controlling through information. I wanted some of the things that the heroes do have to deal with information, and I made glasses the metaphor for this.

Alcatraz is given special types of glasses that, when you look through, do different things. There are some that he has that can tell when someone's speaking the truth or when they're lying. There's one that he wears that can tell how old different objects are in relationship to one another. The lenses that he wears, some will show him where people have walked, shows their footprints and their tracks.

These sort of information based lenses were a metaphor, not only for something I do. I wear glasses. I want wearing glasses to be cool. But beyond that, it became a metaphor for the whole story. The person who controls the information controls the world.

DR. DANA: And I should add here that there are some bad types of lenses, too, that are not as much information but power. Torture is--

BRANDON SANDERSON: Lenses that shoot out lasers and stuff.

DR. DANA: Yeah, lasers and wind and slowing down movement and that sort of thing.

BRANDON SANDERSON: Alcatraz keeps trying to get lots of lenses like that, and he never really gets very many of them. And it's a constant source of complaining to him, that instead of getting the laser beam lenses, he ends up with lenses that can show how old things are and stuff like that. But one of the metaphors for the book is that can be just as powerful if used the right way. He does get some laser beam lenses in the first book, but you'll have to read to see how he uses those. They don't end up getting used precisely as one might expect.

DR. DANA: So can you please tell us more about Bastille? She's so mean. I love her.

BRANDON SANDERSON: Bastille comes from-- man, where did Bastille even come from? I wanted to have one of the Knights of Crystallia be in the books, and I wanted to play with people's conceptions and expectations, part of what these books are about. When I say knight, I wanted something you didn't expect, something Alcatraz didn't expect. Grandpa Smedry mentioned his bodyguard early on, the knight he sent to try and keep him out of trouble. And beyond that, the Smedry family in general have a reputation for getting themselves into lots of trouble, and so there's this order of knights who exist, whose main duty in life is to keep the Smedrys from getting themselves killed.

And so most Smedrys you see will be having a nice bodyguard run around behind them, trying to put out the fires that they start and keep things from going all crazy. So I wanted, when this knight walked on the stage, to be someone unexpected, and so I made the knight Bastille, a 13-year-old girl who is not what you would expect when I say knight. You would maybe expect this kind of noble, honorable person who is doing their job for the better good, but I thought, you know, if your job is to take care of this kooky old man, Grandpa Smedry, who's always getting into trouble and always doing what he's not supposed to, you might be kind of grumpy about it. And that's where Bastille came from, a 13-year-old knight with a magic sword, whose job is to keep Grandpa Smedry and Alcatraz out of trouble, and is quite grouchy about the fact that she's been given the duty to keep the two worst Smedrys in the history of Smedry-dom out of trouble.

DR. DANA: This made me laugh. It was the beginning of the second book, and Alcatraz has just been rescued from the clutches of evil librarians in an airport. And this rogue ladder comes slapping down on the pavement. He climbs it, and he's climbing up through the clouds.

And Bastille is leaning an over the side, and you're expecting this reunion of the two of them to be somewhat touching. And she's shouting something, and he yells, "What?" She says, "Are you going to hang there all day looking stupid, or are you going to climb up here?"

BRANDON SANDERSON: Yeah, Bastille's existence in the book is supposed to be like a bucket of cold water. Whenever she shows up, she dumps it on you and wakes you up and says, all right, let's get moving.

DR. DANA: I think it's hilarious that librarians are considered bad guys. These books are on library shelves. They're on librarians' recommendation list. So were you just shushed by too many librarians in your youth?

BRANDON SANDERSON: Honestly, it just came from me trying to come up with the most ridiculous group I could think of. In fact, the original image was-- I'm like, OK, who's the secret cabals going to rule the world? And I had this image pop into my head of this kindly old grandmotherly woman with this knit shawl and stuff behind the library desk at the library where I've always checked out books, and imagining her having this giant battle axe sitting underneath, just waiting to slam at the wrong person or something like this. The concept made me laugh so much that I had to write the book.

Librarians in general, I have found, they're not the hushing, shushing type. I hung out with a lot of librarians. Even before the Alcatraz books, I hang out with a lot of them, and they tend to be actually really kind of zany people, the type of people who love books and want to spend their life with books. And they can be a quite wild bunch, I've discovered much to my shock.

So shushing librarians, I'm not sure if that even really exists. I haven't met any. Mostly, I found pretty wild and crazy, witty librarians to be the case. And so generally, they seem to get the idea that-- and plus, most of them, I think, would rather be known as an evil cabal that rules the world as opposed to the boring people who sit behind desks and stamp your books.

DR. DANA: So the newest book in the series, *Alcatraz Versus the Knights of the Crystallia*, is due out this month. What is in store for us?

BRANDON SANDERSON: Well, let's see. *Alcatraz Versus the Knights of Crystallia* is where Alcatraz finally gets to visit the Free Kingdom, where his family is from. The first book happens in America. The second book happens in the Library of Alexandria, which is kind of in this in between place between worlds.

And the third book, he gets to visit Nalhala, the City of Capitals, which is a city made up entirely of capitals. Everybody lives in a capital. In this book, he finally gets to see where he comes from and go to a place where, instead of just being nobody, he's known as being Alcatraz Smedry, the heir to the Smedry line. He's an immediate rock star, which is completely unanticipated and unexpected for him.

But at the same time, he's been dealing with librarians who have been trying to get the Sands of Rashid and trying, in various ways, to control the world through a lot of violent and dramatic means. What's going on in Nalhala is there's a group of librarians called Wardens of the Standard, who are the more political intrigue focused librarians, and they're starting a political movement where they're trying to accomplish some nefarious deeds through use of the actual legal political system. And so it becomes a different sort of fight for Alcatraz and his friends, as they're working against a treaty, which is being signed, that will essentially give up one of the Free Kingdoms to librarian control in exchange for a group of promises from the librarians that, of course, Alcatraz and Grandpa don't believe for a second that the librarians will keep.

Like I said, it's a different kind of story. We'll start delving into Alcatraz's relationship with his parents a little bit more, and who they are, and why they did what they did, and things like that. So that's book three, *Alcatraz Versus the Knights of Crystallia*. Should start showing up in stores, oh, end of this month, beginning of next month.

DR. DANA: Well, Brandon Sanderson, thanks so much for coming on the BiblioFiles. It's been a real pleasure. I really enjoy these books a lot.

BRANDON SANDERSON: Oh, well, thank you so much.

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