

Cape Gave Chatham Author Grounding To Write Neanderthal Series

by Debra Lawless

A prolific South Chatham author is writing a compelling series of novels set in a prehistoric era and told in the voice of a Neanderthal named Tris.

Beth Meigs, who writes under the name E.A. Meigs, launched her series with "The Dreamer: The Beginning" (2016). She continued with "The Dreamer II: The Gathering" (2017) and "The Dreamer III: The People of the Wolves" (2018). "The Dreamer IV: The Cave of Bones" will appear next year.

When we first meet Tris he is waking up in his family's earth-bermed home, a kind of dugout. With him is his dog Rooph, and elsewhere in the berm are his parents Puh and Muh, and his siblings Ty, Saree, Twie, Ru and Mi. Tris is the oldest of the group; the siblings are spaced out in about three-year intervals. The year is roughly 40,000 BCE.

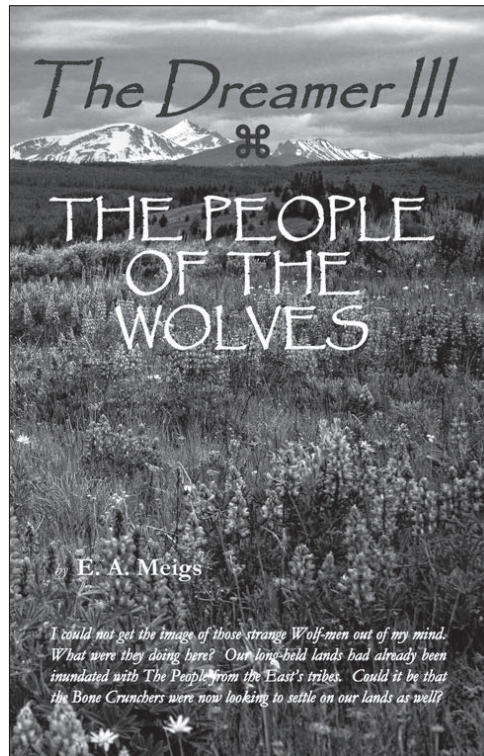
From what does this kind of ambitious novel spring?

"First and foremost, I believe my childhood on the Cape gave me a solid foundation from which to build a life," Meigs said in a recent email interview. "I was surrounded by a large and loving extended family, and although I hated time spent in school during my pre-high school years, outside of school I was able to pursue the things I loved."

Meigs's father was a commercial fisherman and an outdoorsman and he taught her about nature, the outdoors and boats. "Some of my earliest memories are of walking in the woods with my dad while he pointed out things to me and explained what they were, what they could be used for, or if they should be avoided altogether," she recalls. In some ways, this echoes the fictional relationship between Tris and Puh.

Something else, too, may have turned Meigs into a writer. "There wasn't much TV reception on the Cape when I was growing up, so we seldom had a television and didn't have one that worked well until I was in high school," she says. "That may have contributed to the fact that my family and I were all avid readers." And she was also a writer, writing her first novel at age 10.

In 1978 she graduated from Cape Cod Regional Technical High School with a certificate in marine repair. Later, Meigs moved to Florida where she worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service and as a resident employee in a state park. When she returned to her roots on Cape Cod, she



realized that "being away from the Cape has given me a deeper appreciation for my home."

Now, it is likely that when you think of Neanderthals, you imagine a cave and maybe a dug-up tooth or bone resting on the palm of an anthropologist. To call someone a Neanderthal is to insult their eating habits, or to imply they're primitive. But how did Neanderthals live? How were they like us, and how were they not like us? These are the questions Meigs tackles. She believes, as she writes in the introduction to her first book, that "early man was potentially much more advanced than is generally credited." Her Neanderthal characters are much more advanced than those of "The Clan of the Cave Bear," Jean M Auel's 1980 bestselling novel that also explored

the relationship between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons. Meigs's Neanderthals speak, rather than communicating with sign language.

Meigs has researched early man extensively, largely by reading academic papers. Before writing her first novel, she estimates she devoted over 400 hours to research. She has always been interested in paleoanthropology, nature, history, genetics and survival situations.

"Paleoanthropology is an incredibly fast-growing field, and theories change constantly," she says. "Although I take pains to make my books as historically accurate as possible, this is challenging because so much of the available data is conjecture."

And when scientists conjecture, novelists are given a wide open canvas to fill in the blanks.

"I love doing this legwork," Meigs says. "I am truly passionate about these subjects."

Neanderthals are said to have gone extinct roughly 40,000 years ago. One of the central conflicts in the book is that the Neanderthals overlapped with other types of humans. Tris falls in love with a Cro-Magnon, which is an early version of today's humans. Meigs tells us that while Neanderthal men stood about five-feet-five and had tremendous upper body strength, the Cro-Magnons were lighter and taller. Both the Neanderthals and the Cro-Magnons frowned upon a "mixed marriage."

In the third book, Meigs introduces yet another group, "the Bone Crunchers," Denisovans. These humans are built like Neanderthals, but have enormous teeth. One of the Denisovans takes a liking to Tris's younger sister Ru, and yet another conflict ensues.

Meigs's books have a kind of wonder as Tris discovers the world around him. For example, he first sees his own reflection in standing water just before he is about to be married, and mistakes it for a man starting back at him. Later, he notes that the Cro-Magnons like jewelry and also sing. As he tells us, "They sometimes stretched out spoken words as they told their stories. They called it singing. It was interesting and sometimes beautiful to hear, but it took a while to become accustomed to the sounds." These are the wide-eyed observations of a child... or of the beginning of culture.

To buy Meigs's trilogy, visit www.dreamerliteraryproductions.com.