

PARALLEL WORLDS **BOOK 1**

PARAWORLD ZERO



Matthew Peterson

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BOOK ONE**

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ZERO**

Matthew Peterson

Parallel Worlds LLC
Peoria, Arizona

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

PARAWORLD ZERO: BOOK ONE OF THE PARALLEL WORLDS SERIES

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Dedication

To my loving wife and to our five wonderful boys,
who prayed and prayed for my dream to come true.

Acknowledgments

Many people have played a role in the creation of my book, but none more than my family. For over a year, my little children prayed in earnest for someone to publish *Paraworld Zero*. Their sweet prayers were finally answered. I would like to thank them for their faithfulness.

My wife deserves more gratitude than I can give. She has been the pillar of strength that has kept me going all this time. Her inspiration has made my book what it is today. Thank you, my dearest friend.

Other family members—especially my parents, my wife’s family, and my “almost” twin brother, Paul—have also lent me their support and encouragement. Thank you, guys. I love you!

Many thanks go to the authors at the online writers groups I participated in. I wish you all success. Lastly, I’d like to acknowledge the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Lloyd Alexander, and Douglas Hill. Without their inspiring books I never would have started this project. They gave a young boy the power to dream. And now I can share that dream with everyone.

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Prologue

The Storm

The woman was dying, and no one on Earth would mourn for her when she was gone. Not a soul would know of the secrets she possessed or of the ultimate power that emanated from within her limp body. The hope of the universe was about to be lost—that is, unless she arrived at the hospital in time.

A torrent of watery darts hit the windshield as the ambulance squealed around another corner. The hospital was not much farther. A spark of lightning erupted in the night sky, as if to point the way the ambulance should go. Rumbling sounds resonated from the darkness above, accompanied by a faint groan of atmospheric indigestion echoing in the distance. The storm, like the mighty hand of a demon, buffeted the vehicle with its cold fist, but the driver remained steadfast.

“We’re losing her,” a paramedic cried.

“Come on, lady. You can make it,” another said.

The vehicle skidded to a complete stop, and the back doors flung open. Interns rushed to help with the gurney, but in the process, one of them slipped on the wet concrete and lost his grip, causing the stretcher to jolt. The poor woman, her skin infested with blistered lesions, lifted her head and moaned. One of the students gasped.

A paramedic took hold of the gurney and entered the emergency room. He tried to keep his eyes away from the grotesque figure in his care, tried not to even breathe the same air that spewed from her deformed lips and nostrils. Visions of horrible diseases filled his mind, but he dispelled them with the thought of a quick dispatch to labor and delivery.

A consternated expression etched itself across the gynecologist's face. Word of the woman's arrival had spread quickly. The doctor peered at the sores on her face and arms. "What happened to her?"

"I dunno," the paramedic said. "She's all tripped out and won't say noth'n."

"I see."

"Someone found her in a park and called it in," he added. "She's not contagious, is she?"

The gynecologist winced but remained silent. He looked closer at the gruesome sores on her body, then pulled up her sleeve and discovered more pustules on her arm. He checked her legs and found that they too were infected.

"I have no idea what this is. Almost looks like she's been exposed to something." He turned to a young nurse. "Do an ultrasound and get blood and tissue samples. Keep me posted."

"Aren't ya gonna set up a quarantine or something?" the paramedic asked.

"I want to know what we're dealing with before we put the whole city in a panic. It could just be an allergic reaction."

The woman on the gurney jerked upright, as if waking up from a nightmare. "My son!"

"Calm down, ma'am. We're here to help."

"My son . . . Simon . . . His name is Simon," she mumbled. "And his . . . And . . ." Her eyes glazed over.

Just then, the doctor noticed the blood and discharge on the sheets. “Nurse, delay that order. We’re not going to have time for tests.” The patient arched her back and screamed. “Her baby wants to come right now. Let’s get ready.”

The paramedic left, and the nurses took charge. They moved the pregnant woman directly to a birthing room. The windows streamed with rushing water, and the howling wind fought against the thick glass. Ferocious thunder hammered the building, making the surgical instruments vibrate. One nurse held up a sterile gown for the doctor to put his arms through while another nurse doused the woman’s belly with clear gel.

The doctor held her hand gently. “What’s your name?”

The monitor picked up a huge contraction, which surged throughout the woman’s body like a tidal wave. She clenched his fingers in a vice-like grip.

“Forget the ultrasound,” the doctor said, releasing his hand and stumbling past the nurse. “I can already see the head. That was fast. Ma’am, I need you to push.”

The woman held her breath and pushed. Her face turned red. She let out a deep sigh and pushed again. Beads of sweat collected on her forehead.

“Almost there . . .” the doctor said mechanically. “Almost there . . .” A twinge of nervousness crept into his voice as three pustules on the woman’s skin burst. He adjusted his hands, avoiding the thick liquid that oozed from the open sores. “Just one more push.”

Within moments, a baby’s cry filled the room. The doctor picked up a plastic syringe and suctioned the amniotic fluid out of the newborn’s small mouth. A nurse handed him a pair of surgical scissors.

“Congratulations! You have a boy.” He snipped the umbilical cord.

Suddenly, an explosion of bright blue light sprang from the baby and shattered the glass in the doors and windows. The medical personnel dropped to the

floor. A whirlwind of pastel light filled the once-bland room, and a strange mist arose from somewhere below. The wisps of sparkling color danced upon the plumes of thick smoke and vapor, making it hard for anyone to focus his or her eyes. The doctor looked up, squinting to see through the chaos, and gasped as he witnessed the infant emerge from the translucent smoke.

Simon was floating in the air.

“Oh, my . . .” cried a nurse from beneath a table. Breathing hard, almost to the point of hyperventilation, she made the motions of a cross on her chest.

Simon looked in her general direction, his brown eyes wide open and his arms flailing about. He drifted towards the bed, the smoke parting on both sides of his frail body as he moved, and came to rest in the arms of his mother.

Smiling, she brought out a necklace she’d been wearing beneath her blouse. Attached to the gold chain was a medallion—about the size of a silver dollar, ebony in color, and beautiful in workmanship. The colorful lights reflected off the metallic pendant as she placed it on her son’s bare chest.

She looked at the doctor and whispered, “Give him this.” Then she closed her eyes and died.

The smoke and colorful lights soon dissipated, leaving the small room cold and lifeless as before. Everyone remained silent. Not even the wind outside dared to make a sound. The storm had finally ended.



Chapter 1

Simon's Bad Day

Two knives, protruding from the knuckles of a leather glove, vibrated above Simon's sweaty forehead. The boy, small for his age, desperately held on to the man's wrists.

"I have you now," his assailant snickered as the tips of the blades scraped against Simon's glasses. An evil grin spread across the villain's scarred face.

"Never!" Simon shouted.

With a sudden eruption of energy, he threw the dark man off and leapt to his feet. Demonstrating perfect form, Simon kicked the menacing glove and shattered the twin blades. The second his foot landed on the ground, he spun in the air and sent a crescent kick hard into his opponent's face.

Simon walked up to his fallen enemy, who by this time was cowering on the floor, and proclaimed, "As long as there's good in the world, evil will never prevail!"

A tumult of cheers and clapping came from the ecstatic crowd nearby. Confetti filled the air, and young girls swooned around the scrawny boy, asking for autographs.

A TV reporter with a microphone ran up to Simon and announced, "I'm here with Simon Kent, who just saved the city of New York from certain doom. Simon,

I have just one question I think everyone here would like to know the answer to: Why are you in your underwear?”

“*Wh-Wh-What?*” he stuttered.

“Why are you in your underwear?”

Simon looked down and realized he wasn’t wearing anything but his glow-in-the-dark Batman boxers. Looking up, he saw the crowd of pre-teenage girls and boys laughing at him.

“Do they give you special powers?” the reporter asked with a smirk. She burst into laughter.

“*Simon—Simon!*”

Simon opened his eyes and found himself sitting at a desk in Mr. Bartholomew’s seventh-grade English class.

“Nice of you to join the class, Mr. Kent,” the teacher said. “I think we have time for one more book report. Why don’t we have Simon go next?”

Simon’s heart sank. He took a puff from his inhaler and fumbled around in his fanny pack. A handheld video game machine, erasers, old candy corn from Halloween, a couple of extra batteries, some chewed-up pencils, and a few quarters, but no book report.

“I—I can’t seem to find it.”

“Mr. Maloy.” The teacher turned to a neighboring classmate. “What happens to students who forget their homework?”

The boy, caught off guard, thought for a moment. “Um . . . they get detention?”

“No, no, no! Well, yes, in some cases—but that’s beside the point.” Mr. Bartholomew turned to his favorite student. “Jenny, can you help us out?”

“Certainly,” she said in a superior voice. “They fail.”

“That’s correct. They fail. Anyone who thinks he or she can just sleep through life—or my class, for that matter—has another think coming. You can’t expect to succeed in life if you—”

Just then, a wonderful ringing noise flooded Simon’s ears. It wasn’t a pretty tone by any means, but to Simon, it sounded like a chorus of angels swooping in to carry him away from the horrible situation. It was the school bell.

All of the kids jumped up to leave, but Mr. Bartholomew stood his ground. “You can’t expect to succeed in life . . .” he said loudly to get their attention. The students paused, and the teacher finished his lecture with, “. . . if you don’t *apply* yourself.” He directed his last comment specifically towards Simon.

* * *

Children from seventh to twelfth grade stampeded through the hallways to get to their classes. Simon felt like a dwarf among giants, not just because of his low status on the totem pole but because of his unusually short height. He was a sickly boy with plastic-framed glasses, thick chestnut hair, and a slightly crooked nose. His legs were birdlike, and his ears seemed to stick out too far from his head.

His only love in life was playing video games; it was the only thing he was good at. He could outplay just about anyone, and he knew it.

“Simon Kent,” a slow, cold voice sounded from behind. Simon cringed. He stuck his face in his open locker, hoping the person would go away.

“I heard about what happened in English class. Mrs. Trimble will be so disappointed in you. . . . She may even take away your video games.”

Simon turned around to face the sophomore behind him. “Y-Y-You’re not going to t-t-tell her, are you?” Simon stuttered only when he was really nervous, and the thought of having his most prized possessions taken away simply terrified him.

“Oh,” the older boy said melodramatically, “I’m sure she’ll find out sooner or later.” He chuckled as Simon squirmed.

“Hey, Butch,” came the sultry voice of Sara Parker, the most beautiful girl in school. Two large boys followed her: Buz Atkins, the biggest kid in school, and Spike Peters, the oldest kid in school. No one knew how old Spike really was, but rumor had it that he’d been held back three years in a row. “Are you coming over tonight?” Sara asked, her lips pouting.

“Yeah,” said Butch, “I’ll be there.” He smacked Simon on the back. “See ya later, punk.” At that, he walked away with Sara, leaving Buz and Spike behind to torment Simon. Both seniors laughed maliciously, but Simon didn’t know why.

Tall, handsome, and full of muscles, Butch was the envy of all the students in school. He always knew what to say to make people like him or do what he wanted. Sara, his girlfriend, was just crazy about him—and everyone else was crazy about her.

Even as a sophomore, Butch was the star quarterback and held awards for just about every sport Simon could think of. He wore his letterman jacket every day to display his many achievements. On top of all that, a flock of students consistently hovered around him, basking in his glory.

But Butch had a dark side that only a few knew about. Simon had lived with him in the foster home—often referred facetiously as “the orphanage” by many of the children—for almost three years now, and he was keenly aware of the horrible things Butch would do during his sadistic mood swings. For example, one time Butch poured toilet cleanser into Simon’s ant farm in retaliation to a simple quarrel; the poor insects never stood a chance.

Unlike Simon, Butch entered the orphanage at age twelve. His parents had been abusive. Simon remembered one day overhearing Butch tell the younger kids a story about how he had been locked in the basement for two weeks without food and how he had to drink from the toilet to survive. Simon doubted the validity of his story, but then again, there might have been some truth to it.

“*Ouch!*” Simon yelped. Someone had just kicked him. “Ouch! Stop it!”

Everyone—especially Buz and Spike—seemed to be attacking him. The kicks weren’t dreadfully hard, but for a small person like Simon, they were earth-shattering.

Simon dropped his books by accident, and when he bent over to pick them up, he received two more swift kicks from behind. The teenagers broke into laughter as Simon’s face smashed into the hard tile floor. His glasses broke and a trickle of blood appeared from a tiny cut above his eye.

Tripping on his books, the young boy fumbled for cover while the bullies followed in pursuit. Desperate, he rushed to the emergency exit and flung open the doors. A loud warning bell echoed through the hallways, but Simon didn’t hear it, for he was already maneuvering his way through the parking lot.

He found himself running down a busy street. Normally, his first instinct would have been to head towards the orphanage, but another building drew his attention instead—the video arcade. A sign at the door read: No Students Allowed Before 2:00 PM.

His watch showed 1:23 p.m., so he sat down at the edge of the curb and counted the reasons why nobody liked him. He even surprised himself by the extensive list he created. How could someone be so unloved?

As the minutes passed by, he noticed a bunch of large black ants attempting to carry a green leaf with a nest of caterpillar eggs attached to it—a food source that would sustain the insects for some time—but the leaf hardly budged. Simon gazed in amusement as a family of smaller ants kept walking onto the leaf, weighing it down. Perturbed by this, the larger ants would let go of the leaf to chase off the smaller ants, but as the big ants were lured away, the remaining small ants monopolized the leaf until they too were forced away by their larger cousins. The two types of ants

fought in this manner, over and over. And after several minutes, the leaf hadn't moved even one centimeter.

Suddenly, a screeching tire rolled over both groups of ants. Mrs. Trimble had just pulled up. She rolled down her window. "Simon, let's go home."

"How did you know I was here?"

"This is where I'd go if I just had a bad day," she said with a warm smile. Simon got into the station wagon, and they drove off.

* * *

The orphanage, which was really just an old two-story home, belonged to Mrs. Trimble, a kind, elderly woman who loved her job very much and loved her foster children even more. But since her husband's recent passing, she had been forced to reevaluate her position as overseer of the foster home. She wasn't as young as she used to be, and she found herself relying more and more on the aid of her niece, Maggie.

Although she took care of a handful of adolescents, most of her affection centered on Simon. She even enrolled him in karate lessons to help raise his self-esteem. Some of the other children in the foster home thought she showed favoritism, but Simon knew the real reason she paid so much attention to him: He reminded Mrs. Trimble of her son.

After attending to some menial tasks and thanking her niece for babysitting once again, Mrs. Trimble walked into the children's bedroom on the second floor, holding a bottle of alcohol and a clean rag. Simon was sitting on the edge of a well-used bed, playing a video game on his handheld device. A tiny six-year-old named Dimitri sat next to him and watched in awe.

"Dimitri, what have I told you about getting too close to the other kids?" Mrs. Trimble scolded. "The whole reason you stayed home from school today was so you wouldn't make anyone sick."

“Sorry.” The little boy sneezed. Dimitri was a cute blond-haired boy with a good heart, deep blue eyes, and a stuffy nose.

The boy exited the room, but Simon didn’t seem to notice; he sat in his own little world, covered by shadows. Mrs. Trimble turned on the light, but the room didn’t brighten very much because three of the four light bulbs had already burned out. She noticed the sheet of paper taped to Simon’s back. It read: Kick Me!

“Oh, my goodness!” Mrs. Trimble exclaimed, pulling the paper off his back. She turned the sheet over and read the first sentence of Simon’s book report. “Who would do such a thing?” Simon didn’t even look up.

She dipped the rag into the alcohol. “This may hurt a bit.”

She wasn’t kidding! Simon thought. His cut stung as she patted the dried blood on his forehead. He flinched to remind her of the pain but not enough to stop himself from playing his video game.

Mrs. Trimble removed his broken glasses. A spider web design ran down one of the lenses, while the warped frame pushed the other lens out of place.

“Simon, why do you insist on wearing these things? You know you don’t really need glasses.”

“You wouldn’t hit someone with glasses, would you?” he asked dryly, not moving his eyes from the video display.

“Of course not.” She pulled open a drawer that contained a slew of eyeglasses, most of which were damaged, and tossed the broken pair in with the others. The old woman fumbled around the drawer until she found a good pair. She put them onto Simon’s face. “So you think the kids at school will stop hurting you if you wear glasses?”

“Not just the kids at school. Butch has it in for me.”

“Butch?” she said, surprised. “Butch is as gentle as a lamb.”

“No he’s not!” Simon shot back. “He’s the meanest person I’ve ever met.”

“Look, Simon, Butch has had it pretty bad. His parents were murdered a few years ago . . .” She paused, then continued, “. . . on his birthday, of all days.”

“What happened?” Simon remained intent on his game.

“I’m only telling you this so you’ll understand where he’s coming from. What I tell you stays in this room, okay?”

Simon nodded.

“His mother and father were stabbed to death, and the killer was never found. You remember when he first came here? He was the most troubled boy I’d ever seen. It took days before he could talk to the police.”

“I didn’t know,” Simon whispered.

“Not many people do.” Mrs. Trimble stood up to put the alcohol back into the bathroom cupboard. She started to walk away.

“Where’s my mom and dad?”

Mrs. Trimble turned around. The young boy had switched off his video game and was looking up at her, longingly. Although she had been the only mother he had known, it wasn’t enough; he had to know the truth.

“Where’s my mom and dad?” he asked again, more firmly. He wasn’t about to let her dodge the question—not this time.

She looked solemnly at the carpet. “You don’t know, do you?” she whispered. “I never did tell you . . . I suppose it’s about time I did.” She sat next to him, and Simon’s stomach churned in anticipation.

“I wasn’t there when it happened, but I was told that when you were born, you really gave the doctors a show. Your mother was—how should I say this?—not *well-to-do*.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was homeless—a vagrant, I suppose. She came into the hospital with no money, no ID, and just the clothes on her back. Well, she did have something. Come with me.”

The two of them walked out of the room and into the hall.

What in the world could it be? His stomach did somersaults, and his weak lungs forced him to take a deep puff from his inhaler to compensate for his excitement.

In all the years Simon had been at the orphanage, he had never been inside Mrs. Trimble’s bedroom—not many of the children had—but that was exactly where the old lady was leading him. She pulled out a key and unlocked the door.

Nearly everything in the room looked older than Simon: a battered coffee table and lamp, a few Oriental rugs, pictures of relatives, an aging record player, and so on.

Simon noticed a black and white photograph of a young man dressed in a pilot’s jumpsuit, standing in front of an airplane. This must have been Mrs. Trimble’s son, David, before he was shot down in the Vietnam War. Simon frowned at the old photograph. How could he, a scrawny boy, remind her of the big, strong man in the picture?

“This way,” she said.

Mrs. Trimble urged Simon to the back of the room. She detached part of the molding from the wall, revealing a secret compartment. Several shiny objects glistened from the rays of sun that crept in through the wooden blinds. From within the tiny hole, Mrs. Trimble brought out a jet-black medallion attached to a thin golden chain.

“This was your mother’s,” she said, handing it to him. Simon stared at the strange engravings embedded in the medallion. The metal was cold to the touch, but it seemed to warm his heart.

“Simon,” she continued slowly, “your mother isn’t coming back. She died in the hospital when you were born. She said she wanted you to have this.”

Simon felt as if his heart had just been ripped in two. “And where’s my dad?” he asked behind a snuffle, dreading the answer.

“I don’t know. Your father was never found. In fact, we don’t even know what your mother’s name was . . . but I think you should know that she loved you very much. No one can describe the love a mother has for her son.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and the two of them hugged. As they embraced, Simon gazed at the old photograph sitting on the mantel. Mrs. Trimble’s large and handsome son was just so different from what the boy had expected . . . so different from Simon.

* * *

That night, Simon lay sobbing in his bed. Everyone in the house was asleep—or at least, he thought they were—but then Dimitri’s small, familiar voice broke the silence. “What’s wrong?”

Simon wiped his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Dimitri said innocently. “Why are you crying?”

Tears trickled down Simon’s face. “Because I killed my mother.” He wept bitterly.

Dimitri put his tiny arm around his friend and comforted him in the dark.



About the Author

Matthew Peterson graduated from Brigham Young University in Business Management. He now spends much of his time writing, programming, and maintaining his website, www.ParaWorlds.com (an online community where aspiring authors can critique each other's work and discuss the business of writing).

He served a two-year mission in Alabama for the LDS church, received the Eagle Scout award, and earned a second degree black belt in karate. He currently lives in Arizona with his wife, five boys, and a giant African tortoise.

Matthew began writing the Parallel Worlds series in 1990 at the age of fourteen, but a computer failure put the project on hold. Over a decade later, Matthew caught the vision again and completed Paraworld Zero.