

Sam Williams

FREEDOM UNBOUND

Linux Magazine caught up with Sam Williams, author of "Free as in Freedom", a biography of Richard Stallman and his crusade for Free software

Linux Magazine – How long did it take you to write the book?

Sam Williams – About a year from start to finish, a time that was full of love and treachery, some of the baser human emotions. About 18 months ago I was approached by an agent from a publishing company who was interested in doing a book about Richard Stallman, and negotiations were started.

Unfortunately the book project fell through because of some of the unique licensing issues involved, but not the relationship that developed with the agent from the publishing company and me, we were later to get married.

O'Reilly was the only publisher that could accommodate the content licence that we required in terms of the digital realm. About June last year they agreed, then from August until Christmas the main writing took place, although most of the main writing had already been organised in the form of research, I just had to go through my log. I spent about 30 days in a row writing everyday all day.

LM – What did you know of Richard Stallman before you were asked to write the book?

SW – I had interviewed him about three or four times before. My first encounter with him would have been the LinuxWorld trade show, March 1999, where the initial launch of GNOME 1.0 took place, with full press coverage. I was just clueless at the time, and I asked him "What does this mean for the Linux operating system?" and I remember him jumping down my throat for not calling it GNU/Linux, reminding me that it was disrespectful to all of those that had worked on the GNU project to not give it the more full title of GNU/Linux.

At first, he seemed to me to be a prima donna, but as I got to know him more I came to realise that this was just how I was interpreting his quirky personality.

LM – Do enough people see past his quirky personality?

SW – That was my approach to the book. The idea running through my head was that will people see RMS differently in a hundred years in the future, when his personality is not around to get in the he way. I felt that it would be a complete disservice not to focus on

that personality and how it has hampered him in some ways and given him strength in others. RMS will say it about himself that his primary asset is that of stubbornness, not everybody could say "I'm never ever going to use proprietary software again for the rest of my life". Well, he said it, has the will to back it up, and, more importantly has the coding skills to go and write some thing and do that every day to build something that he can use and that other people can build upon.

LM – Did you know about GNU before your introduction to RMS?

SW – I knew about it but only in a general way, as part of doing research into Linux. I only got to know about it at the '99 LinuxWorld show. Here he really made his comeback, with all the tech media gathered, they called it the coming out party for Linux. He really used that platform skilfully, to make people aware that there had been work going on since '85 and the Linux OS wasn't something that Linus Torvalds had pulled out of his brain, being disrespectful to the GNU project and not acknowledging how much effort is involved in developing an operating system of this size. So I knew a little about GNU by listening to some of his speeches, but it really was in the course of writing the book that my respect, both for him and the project, was raised.

LM – What were the licensing issues that halted the book originally?

SW – I was approached by a company who were interested in doing an electronic book about RMS, they wanted a subject that was going to appeal to the Internet community. I said I would do it, but then, during the course of researching the book I realised that RMS really detested the electronic book and its proprietary formats, with the texts of such books being 'rented' in a restricted form. The whole RMS argument was that software should give you liberty, and we were creating a product that would give readers less liberty than a paper book.

Unfortunately, the publishers were not in the business of giving away their content. The subject matter would have made it a prime target for the cracker community, taking the challenge to make sure the text was made available. We couldn't reach agreement on this, so the book deal fell through.

Info

Author Sam Williams
Publisher O'Reilly
 (www.oreilly.com)
Price £15.95
ISBN 0-596-00287-4