

2006/Aug DUGALD STEER - Publishing News

Every so often the unpredictable happens. Out of the blue, a book takes off, goes stratospheric and spawns not only sequels and spin-offs, but flattering, if intensely annoying, imitations as well. Back in 2002, when Dugald Steer, then the Senior Editor at Templar Publishing, was asked to think about what a high-priced novelty book, with possible cross-over appeal - maybe using dragons as the subject - would look like, he had no idea what was about to be set in motion. This was the birth of the 'Ologies.

"I came up with about four different concepts for how it could work," he says. "The one I put in at the very last minute featured a letter from 'Dr Ernest Drake', which actually appears at the front of *Dragonology*. Mandy [Wood, MD] saw that, liked the character and thought the idea had possibilities." How right she was. Five million books later, it's easy to look back and say it was as simple as that - that the Templar template of high quality production values and editorial, wedded to innovative novelties and a 'gift' style of packaging, was obviously a winning combination; but no one had done it quite like this before, and certainly not at a very premium price point.

As an editor, Steer had one major advantage over almost anyone else in the field: he knew, understood and actually quite liked the production processes and technical side of the business. "I always work with a costings breakdown in my head. I know how many cents you have to pay for each kind of novelty, and that makes it much easier for me to do the book. Planning out the whole thing, novelties included, makes for a better result, as everything matches up and nothing looks like an add-on."

Oddly enough, for someone so suited to the work, Steer never really had any intention of going into children's publishing. After university he taught English in Spain for five years and, when he eventually came back to the UK, he thought the publishing industry might, possibly, be the place for him. "I had written things before, but I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I taught myself Quark Express, taught myself to touch type, and got turned down for every job I applied for, because I didn't have any experience."

Then, in that wonderful way fortune has of dropping possibilities into deserving laps, he heard that Richard Carlisle, one of Templar's founding directors (now no longer involved in the company on a daily basis) was giving a talk about the *Letterland* reading scheme at the school where his mother taught. "I went along and got to speak to him, and he told me there were no jobs at Templar, but talked to me for over an hour about publishing. Two weeks later I got a call from Ruth [Huddleston, Sales and Marketing Director] saying there wasn't an *actual* job, they couldn't pay me very much, but there was a kind of gofer position, if I wanted it."

That was some ten years ago, and he stayed with the company until last year when, about half through producing *Wizardology*, the third book in the series, he announced he wanted to go freelance. "They weren't surprised," he says, "And while I'm not attached to a ball and chain, they are keeping me very busy." Apart from the on-going programme of 'Ologies (the latest, *Pirateology*, published last month, with a first print run of 860,000, and the 'special edition' extras every title brings with it), Steer has added a series of novels, *The Dragonology Chronicles*, to his roster. Continuing the story of Dr Drake, the first of four planned titles, *The Dragon's Eye*, publishes in October.

"I suggested the idea to Templar, who had never done any fiction before, and they thought it was worth seeing how it went; in fact, they're now thinking of doing some more with other people as well. I suppose what I'm doing is almost like *Spiderwick* in reverse...I've done the field guides first and now I'm doing the fiction. It's an experiment, in some ways, but the key accounts people in England and America think it's a good idea, and are all putting their weight behind it." Because of the very tight schedule, Steer, ever the planner, blocked out the storyline and briefed the illustrator, Douglas Carrel, as he was writing the first draft; the words and the pictures, with only a small amount of tweaking when it came to the latter, dovetailed neatly together as planned.

Due to the way that the 'Ologies came into being, Steer acted as editor and author, all rolled into one, in the early days. Having gone solo, who edits him now? "It's basically the same as when I was full-time. My main

editor is Sarah Ketchersid, the Senior Editor at Candlewick Press in America, who's worked on all the 'Ologies; over here, Mandy and Editorial Manager Bruce Martin also work on things at Templar."

With the growing list of titles, did Steer see a time coming when he wouldn't be able to be the creative force behind all the different elements being produced? "Yes...mainly because the books are getting bigger every year. But it's already happening anyway, with the stationery packs Templar have done, which have some creative content; they always show me everything and they always make a pretty good job of it. And the truth is, the major fun you have is with the primary titles, really."

Finally, it's an obvious question, but it has to be asked: what's the next 'Ology going to be? It's a secret, and about as big and closely guarded as you can get. Having discovered the downside of announcing, too early, what the subject matter of this year's book was going to be (viz: Carlton's preemptive strike with its own pirate-themed, large-format gift title), lips are sealed and Steer is saying nothing about what Templar has up its sleeves. we shall just have to wait till Frankfurt, he says, or maybe even Bologna.