

2007/Jan DEREK LANDY - Publishing News

HarperCollins' frankly awe-inspiring seven-figure deal for Dublin-based screenwriter Derek Landy's debut novel, *Skulduggery Pleasant*, was announced back at the beginning of March last year. Three weeks later his agent, Michelle Kass, had five more countries on board and seven other offers on the table, and a fortnight on Landy found himself being paraded round the Bologna Children's Book Fair. Some month that turned out to be.

"It was kind of freaky," says Landy, ensconced in a smart hotel overlooking the Liffey, "to go from pretty small Irish movies, where all the attention is on producers, directors and stars and the writer is the last person who's spoken to, to suddenly be exposed to *all* the attention. And in reality, it hasn't even begun yet."

How right Landy is. He's seen the future - HarperCollins put on a huge event in September just to announce the marketing campaign and promotional plans for the book - and he knows he's going to be the man, on his own, in the spotlight. But he seems astonishingly unfazed, in fact quite calm and relaxed, an amused smile, occasionally bordering on the bemused, on his face. "I recently did my first school event...I didn't know what I was expected to do, so I talked about myself for three quarters of an hour, because, obviously, I am my most favourite subject. I had visions of it all going wrong, but it didn't and I learned a lot."

Big money, and a lot of noise, points to a big idea and *Skulduggery Pleasant* is certainly that; it's a smart, what the Americans might describe as kick-ass story of your less-than-average hero (he's a walking, talking skeleton) and his sidekick Stephanie (she's a wiser-than-her-years 12 year-old). Their repartee is reminiscent of Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn in *His Girl Friday*, the setting is Dublin and there are monsters, spooks and well, skulduggery.

Did this all start as an idea for a film? "No, it was always a book. The idea came to me when I was over in London in 2005. I was in my hotel room and the name *Skulduggery Pleasant* just popped in and it pretty much told me who the

character was - a suave, urbane skeleton who was a detective. It was all there. And I knew instantly it was an actual book and it was for children; it was too much for a film.” Landy chose scripts when he started writing because each one is about hundred pages long, no more - equivalent to a hundred minutes of screen time - and each page is mostly dialogue, double spaced with loads of gaps. “With a book every page is *filled* with words and it seemed a lot more like hard work, so I took the easy way out, as was my wont, then...I’m obviously a changed man now.”

After Skulduggery appeared, Stephanie came along, says Landy, about a minute and a half later when he realised he was going to need an audience identification figure. “The book is written in the third person, with every chapter seen from a certain person’s point of view, apart from Skulduggery; at no stage do we get to see things from his point of view because he’s been alive for however many hundreds of years and has so many secrets that will be exposed later on and I didn’t want to ruin the enigma of a skeleton detective.

“I knew I had to have a main character who I could get inside the head of, so I came up with Stephanie; I taught karate and got to know a lot of kids and realised they were as smart and witty as anyone else, which opened my eyes about people of that age. And in books you can get away with writing characters who talk really fast, but in scripts you can’t so much because producers and directors look at a page of really fast a dialogue and say ‘Look, this isn’t Howard Hawks in 1940s Hollywood, so just slow it down a bit’. Because I can’t actually talk fast - I’ve had a stammer since I was three - I relish the opportunity to have characters who can.”

And relish he does. Landy’s style is a very tasty mix of the cinematic and the novelistic, creating landscapes, set pieces and backdrops against which a cast of vivid heroes and villains play out the rip-roaring storyline “I didn’t consciously do this, I think it dictated itself once I had a detective in a suit, long coat and hat as a main character.” It’s all very well coming up with characters, but they have to work on paper, and to find out if his new creations were compatible Landy sat down in his hotel room and wrote a scene in a

kitchen where Stephanie asks Skulduggery what it's like being a skeleton. It worked so well that the scene, all of it, made its way into the book and can be found in Chapter 4.

Skulduggery Pleasant is not a one-off but the first of three books, so Landy knows, pretty much, what he's going to be doing for the next couple of years, but what of life after the trilogy? "When all this began I assumed, in between books, that I'd be able to write a script, which I can do in a couple of weeks. As it turns out, the books are so much fun and the freedom is too good to go back to screenwriting." He does, he says, at some point want to try and write an adult book, but isn't entirely sure what that will entail. "With *Skulduggery* I was lucky and my attention span didn't waver, I managed to fool it; in the past, when I've tried to write a book, I've got to page thirty and my attention span would realise what was expected of it and fall over and pretend to be dead. So whatever I do next, I'll have to be having a whole lot of fun, as much fun as I'm having now."