

2005/June DARREN SHAN - Publishing News

Darren Shan is a true publishing phenomenon. He has an army of avid fans clamouring and eager to get their hands on everything he writes - no surprises then that he sells containerloads of books worldwide, four million so far and counting - and is never out of the bestseller lists in the 22 languages in which he's published. Shan also has a rapport with his readers akin to that of Jacqueline Wilson and hers, only a lot less pink and rather more gothic. In person he's one of Nature's enthusiasts, and if you visit darrenshan.com, his recently updated website, you'll find he's exactly the same online. If there was such a thing as a tax on exclamation marks, Shan would be paying a lot of it.

But everything isn't quite what it seems. Darren Shan is not only a pseudonym, it's also the name of the central character in *The Saga of Darren Shan*, the 12-part series which launched some five years ago with *Cirque Du Freak*, tore its way further and further up the charts and finally came to its bloody conclusion in October last year in *Sons of Destiny*. So why the subterfuge? "I'd done some adult books under the name Darren O'Shaughnessy already [*Ayumarca*, 1999, and *Hell's Horizon*, 2000, both for Orion, rights reverted], which weren't suitable for children, and I didn't want the situation where kids would go into a shop and think they were getting a nice children's book and pick something that was full of inappropriate material."

Shan, then, came from one of the nicknames anyone called O'Shaughnessy gets called "...and since I wasn't using my own name to write under, and I knew I was going to start off by saying the saga was all a true story, just to give it extra empathy, I said, why don't I use it as the character name as well? Not a huge amount of thought went into the decision! Then I had the problem of resolving everything at the end of the series, explaining how it *could* be true, but that I'm not actually a half-vampire...I must get asked, pretty much every day of the week, if I am. I could have said at the end it was all made up, but the way I've done it allows readers who *want* it to be true to imagine that it is,

but gives me the freedom to go off and write other books. So everybody's happy!"

Was he surprised by the incredibly strong connection his readers have with him? "In a way, but it is brilliant...it's what you dream about when you're starting out; every writer starts out as a reader, and I loved reading Stephen King, I loved David Edding's books and waiting for the new one to come out, and I used to dream that one day there'd be readers waiting for *my* next one to come out. For me that's the best part of it. I started writing to be read, you want people to read your books...but when I began writing children's books they didn't make money - you didn't do it to get rich.

"There were no thoughts in my head that what I was doing would be a money-spinner, it was a side project; I'd never written a children's book before and wasn't sure if I could, but it was just something I wanted to write. I loved the story and hoped some people would like reading it, but it's taken on a life of its own, and for me the fan base is really important, that's why I put so much effort into the website and why I answer all the letters, because I started out a fan myself."

Passionate is the word for Shan. The way he talks, the way he writes, his whole approach to work, storytelling and life in general is encapsulated by it. When he's not out on the road promoting the exploits and adventures of his alter ego he writes at least ten pages a day, every day. Last year he wrote four first drafts (his top figure is six) and this year? "I haven't written any yet, because of all the touring, but," he says, "I hope to do two or three." And when Shan tours he does that with a passion too; this last April alone he went to Taiwan, Holland, Ireland and Hungary (where, on one record-breaking day, he signed for over nine hours) on a total of 15 flights, spending almost as much time flying as he did on terra firma.

In June it starts all over again with the publication of *Lord Loss*, the first in a brand new story arc called *The Demonata*. "It's different, more contemporary, the hero is slightly more savvy and it's set more in the real world this time...some of the fans have got hold of proof copies and the response so far

has been really good; when fans have been immersed in a certain series for some time they can be reluctant to change, and *Lord Loss* is more electric, louder, edgier. But it has to be that way because I can't repeat myself, do another *Saga of Darren Shan*. Grubbs [the hero] isn't even in the second book, which is set 30 years before *Lord Loss*. I'm hoping there'll be about ten books in this series...that's what I'm aiming for."

There seems no reason, earthly or otherwise, for Shan not to hit his target. *Lord Loss* will be getting the full treatment - a Waterstone's exclusive limited edition (666 signed and numbered copies, naturally), a howling dumpbin, downloadable ringtones and logos. The only thing it won't have is a full-blown tour as he really has only recently finished the last one, and there's the small matter of the three books he wants to write.