

## Sept 2012 - DARREN SHAN / Books for Keeps

For someone whose latest cover declares that he's 'The Master of Horror', Darren Shan is not giving off any Vincent Price vibes today. On the contrary, he's got a twinkle in his eye and couldn't really look much happier with the copy of *ZOM-B*, the first instalment of his new 12-part series, that's sitting in front of him on the table.

Having brought us tales of vampires and then demons, was it, I wondered, an inevitability that zombies would be next on his list to write about? "No!" comes the firm response. "No, because I've never thought about it that way...I get lots of letters and e-mails from kids asking me what I'm going to do next, but for me the story always comes first." A good case in point, he says, is *The Demonata* series, which originally started with him trying to write about werewolves, except the story he had in the back of his mind kept on coming out very clichéd, just an ordinary werewolf story that didn't excite him at all.

For Darren the thought of doing something that doesn't excite him is anathema. In the course of trying different approaches to the story he remembered a poem he'd written, back when he was writing poetry, about an eight-armed demon master called Lord Loss. He realised he could bring the character into the story, a story that looked like it was going to be about werewolves, but was, in fact, about demons. "It's similar to what I did in *Cirque du Freak*, where it's not until you're half way through that you realise it's about vampires. Stories that work for me are the ones I have come at from a different angle."

When he started work on *Zom-B* he was looking to write a book about racism and the world post-9/11 "I used to have a flat out in the East End," he says, "and I can remember there was quite a lot of graffiti, an atmosphere of fear and arguments with immigrants, and I wanted to write a book about that and zombies seemed the best way to do it - normally zombies are the biggest threat, and in most zombie stories it's how do you get away from them, how do you drive them back?"

“But there’s a scene in the first book where [the lead character] B’s dad has this poster with two pictures on it, one of a zombie, one of a Muslim, and it says ‘Which Do You Fear Most?’. And that’s a theme which runs through the whole series - you’ve got the end of the world as we know it, undead hordes all over the place, and zombies still aren’t the biggest threat...there’s humans being petty and mean, with power struggles going on and that’s what was interesting to me, taking standard zombie fare and turning it on its head and having this interesting background to it.”

Stephanie Meyer got taken to task by the ‘vampire community’ for playing fast and loose with the blood-sucker rules in her *Twilight* series, so, having decided to use zombies as the vehicle for his project, was he going to have to do the stick to the regulations with his zombies, or would they have a strong element of Shan about them? “They have to, it’s like when I did vampires...” Darren sits back. “I haven’t read the *Twilight* books, but I get letters from fans who don’t like them because it’s so popular; I love it when a horror work, even if it’s not strictly speaking horror, is popular as it’s good for the genre. It can be hard to write genres because they fade in and out of popularity and it’s been hard at times in my career - *Cirque du Freak* was turned down by twenty UK publishers as being too dark for kids...” Darren stops for a moment, reacquaints himself with my question, then goes on. “I think you’ve got to ignore the rules...I pay homage to them, then use them to suit my purposes as I didn’t want to write about *ordinary* zombies; I don’t think there’s much mileage in that.”

Darren started working on this series over four years ago, way before *Walking Dead* hit the TV screens and zombies became something of a genre *du jour*; had he had to make a big effort not to be influenced by what else was out there? No, he says, he simply ignored it. The only time he really had a problem was when, about two books into the project, it was announced that Charlie Higson was doing a zombie series set in London and he knew there would be a certain amount of overlap.

“I didn’t want to *not* do something just because Charlie had done it. When the books have all come out I shall look forward to going back and reading his ones to see how we approach the city from very different points of view

- I think readers will have fun doing that, too. But when I was writing them I didn't want to put myself off by thinking I couldn't do something because Charlie's done it."

How interesting a zombie panel discussion with these two would be, I pondered aloud, to find they have shared stages in the past, but that the last time they were both asked, Darren felt he had to cry off. "It was around the time of the announcement of my new series, which had been under high-security wraps. I couldn't say why I didn't want to do it," Darren smiles, "so when Charlie heard the news he sent me an e-mail saying he now knew why!"

Throughout his whole writing career guts, viscera and gore have been something of a trademark and he obviously has never had any qualms or difficulties with writing about them. But what about taking us, as he does, into the head and heart of a true dyed-in-the-wool racist, was that difficult to do? He replies by quoting the title of a song, 'Everyone's a Little Bit Racist', from the hit musical *Avenue Q*. Racist tendencies, he says, are a part of life, a part of being different; assuming you believe in evolution, he goes on, we came from ape-like creatures, then small tribes, and sticking to your own was a survival strategy, a natural thing in us and he feels it's important to address the trait.

"So tapping into it wasn't actually that difficult. It's very easy to be scared of whoever the villain of the day is - I'm Irish and in the 60s and 70s we were the villains in England and my dad got stopped a few times and asked to explain his movements, his whereabouts. The difficult thing for me was not going too deeply into the mind of a racist; it was fascinating for me, but very off-putting when you read it.

"I wanted to capture the feeling of what it was like to grow up with a racist for a parent and to mirror that racism. In the first drafts of the book I used full-on racist language, all words I'd heard on the street in the East End and at football; I wanted the shock, and then realised that if it's too shocking you lose the point. I wanted to get readers thinking about these things, but if you hit them on the head with a sledgehammer you're just going to give them concussion."

He says he had to pull back and rein himself in, at the same time as trying not to dilute the message, a really hard balancing act. “If I took out all the racist terms it’d be too soft, it needed to be hard and hit you in the face but still allow you to feel a connection with the main character. Because I knew the journey B was going to go on over the series, I could identify with B, but readers of the first book wouldn’t know that; when my agent read *Zom-B* he was horrified and said ‘You’ve got to change the main character - no one’s going to want read about this horrendous character, no one’s going to care!’ and so I went through a lot of re-writes of the first book; although I didn’t take out any of the anger or the fear, I put in the humanity, which needed to be there from the start, so the reader would care.”

Even after all the re-writes, no punches have been pulled in *Zom-B*. There are still plenty of shocks, of the non-blood’n’guts variety, and powerful moments when you can’t quite believe what you’ve just read; it is a fine line that Darren walks, but he walks it with aplomb and has used the credo of ‘less can be more’ to great effect. As he says, it’s when racism seems normal that it’s at its scariest, it’s when it comes from someone like you that it’s at its most twisted, disturbing and insidious. “I wanted the reader to look at themselves - not look at B’s dad and say ‘He’s horrible, he’s nasty, he’s a monster’, but look at themselves and say ‘Could I go down that route?’.”

B’s parental relationships are very much to the fore in the book, and Darren knew, right from the start and even before he’d thought of the zombie angle, that the core of the story was always going to be about a teenager and a teenager’s dad. He wanted to explore how, to a large extent, our parents mould who we are, and that at some point in our lives we all have to make a stand and decide for ourselves if we want to be the person our parents had decided we should be. The alternative - making a stand and becoming our own person - can be difficult he says, especially if you grow up with someone like B’s dad.

It is at this point in our conversation that Darren casually drops the fact that we may well have met to talk about the start of a brand new multi-part series, but not only does he know how it ends, he’s already finished all

twelve books. “I started writing about four years ago, and finished the first draft of Book 12 last year,” he says. “I knew from very early on I wanted to do this like a serial, like Dickens, but I knew I couldn’t do it as fast as he did and wanted to publish once every three months. I also knew that to hit those targets I’d have to have everything stacked up and pretty much ready to go - we’re still editing, obviously, but with four books completely finished.”

He’d never sat down to write, knowing in advance it was going to be a big, long story; with *The Saga of Darren Shan*, when he was writing *Cirque du Freak*, he’d thought he might do another four or five of them, but with each book as a self-contained unit, and he didn’t plan out the story arc until Book 3. *Lord Loss*, on the other hand, was meant to be a one-off book which just grew.

“So this was the first time I sat down to start a several-year-long project and it was *terrifying*, and I didn’t enjoy writing this series because I could see the mountain at the beginning; with the other ones I was already a third of the way up before I realised what I was climbing, and that made it easier. With this I could see it in the distance, I knew exactly what I had to do and the knowledge took the fun out of it, took away a lot of the spontaneity. It wasn’t the most enjoyable working experience...it was a challenge, but I’ve loved the editing.”

As Darren is obviously someone for whom writing is like oxygen I imagine he must have something on the go, apart from editing the *Zom-B* series. I am right. “I’m working on a second adult book, a standalone, hopefully coming out next year, which is probably the darkest thing I’ve ever written and we’re having some interesting debates about how we might make it acceptable!” On a recent holiday he had an idea for a one-off children’s book, which is still bubbling around but hasn’t demanded to be written he says, and there’s a new series he has in mind, which will be quite different to what he’s done so far, and he might start on that soon.

“There’s a few things on the horizon,” Darren continues, “but I haven’t sat down and committed myself to the next work just yet. I’m trying to get my breath back after zombies, which has been a big, big challenge for me,

and at the end of the three years we'll all sit back and have a long drink and say 'Never again!'"