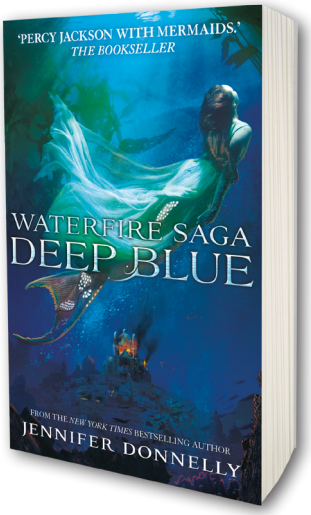

Author Spotlight

Jennifer Donnelly chats to Graham Marks

Jennifer Donnelly is the 2003 Carnegie Medal-winning author of *A Gathering Light*; she is a multi-award winning American writer of historical and Young Adult fiction. Here she talks to Graham Marks, from her home in upstate New York, about her latest novel, *Deep Blue*, which is the first in the *Waterfire Saga* quartet.

We first met eleven years ago, when you were in England for the launch of your first YA novel, *A Gathering Light*; that must have been an incredible time for you.

Yes, it was wonderful!

That was your second book, I think, and it went on to win the Carnegie Medal in the UK as well as the LA Times Book Prize.

I'd written my first adult novel, *The Tea Rose*, and then *A Northern Light*, or *A Gathering Light* as it was called in the UK, came out and it garnered quite a bit of attention here and in the UK, especially with the Carnegie Medal and being featured on Richard and Judy.

That was a strange thing, Phillip Pullman's *Northern Lights* having to be changed to *The Golden Compass* when it came out in the US, and a few years later your book *A Northern Light* getting retitled for the UK…but enough of synchronicity, back to work! What were you doing before you were a writer?

I wanted to write my entire life…I always had written, as an elementary school child, as a teenager, just a lot of stories and poems, and my Mom would send my poems off to the local newspaper. Then when I got out of college I still wanted to make a living writing, but I wasn't sure yet that I wanted to be a novelist. So I got a job in upstate New York, at the Watertown Daily Times, this very two-fisted, scrappy little daily paper, and it was finishing school for me.

It was pandemonium every morning…we had to be in at 6:30am and I think the first edition had to be ready by 7:15am and there was always screaming and yelling and it was always 'What d'you have? What have you come up with?'; I was terrified for those first few weeks and months, and then I got into the swing of things and it taught me such a valuable lesson, and that is that you don't wait for the muse to come. You sit down and you start working and that muse will then show up and look over your shoulder. To this day I can still sit down with a pot of tea and go, and the words will come. I loved [the paper], it was a wonderful education, but I became a novelist and I'm very happy I did that…I prefer a nice, quite pot of tea in my office.

That kind of work also teaches you that there's no such thing as writer's block.

No, there is no such thing as writer's block, it's faking yourself out…maybe you didn't do your work well enough, maybe you didn't think through a plotline, maybe you didn't fully flesh out a character, which means you have to sit back down and work on that; but there's no monstrous wall standing in your way. It's you.

You've said that 'ghosts from the past' have been the inspiration for a lot of your writing, and it seemed to me as if you felt there was a downside to that.

There absolutely is a downside to that…ghosts have inspired all my books, from the *Rose* books*, which were very much based on the ghosts of [Jack] the Ripper's victims and the ghosts of East London, to *A Gathering Light*, which was the ghost of Grace Brown talking, to *Revolution*, which was the ghost of young Louis-Charles, the last King of France. And you sit in a room with these people, day after day, week after week, and in some cases for years, and they give you their stories but they take bits and pieces of your heart in return.

You have to sit with this lonely young woman [Grace Brown], all of nineteen years old, who had been murdered by her lover, and to know of the life that she was not going to live, to feel her soul in her letters and her words - all she could have been and all that she wasn't allowed to be. At one point I was sitting in an archive in Hamilton College, holding her letters, and seeing her handwriting deteriorate, seeing the words scrawl all over the page…I've known girls like Grace and that was just so close to the bone.

It gets to you after a while, and so I got to a point, after finishing [my YA novel] *Revolution*, where I thought 'I need a change from these ghosts, I need to get away from them for a bit and do something new'. I needed a break, I needed something different, I needed a little fantasy in my life. Luckily, at the same time, Disney approached me about this project.

[**The Tea Rose*, *The Winter Rose* and *The Wild Rose*, an adult trilogy.]

How does Disney factor in to the *Waterfire Saga*?

It's a project they originated and they called my agent, with the idea of approaching me to do it…and it's a funny story, because I was looking for an idea for my next novel and I'd gone to the Metropolitan Museum in New York to see a retrospective of [the fashion designer] Alexander McQueen's work; it was astonishing and one of the most moving exhibitions I'd ever seen and I hadn't expected that, I'd thought 'pretty dresses'.

And speaking of trying to get away from ghosts, you really felt McQueen's ghost in those rooms; they were very small and dimly lit and his clothes are just so full of emotion. One collection he did, in the last group of rooms, was inspired by the sea, beautiful dresses that looked as if they'd really been cut from waves and somehow been fashioned from shells; music was playing and water lapping and on a screen overhead there was this video of a young woman in one of these gorgeous dresses, slowly sinking through the water…it was very moving and very eerie, and I was looking at it thinking 'Who is she supposed to be? Is she Viola, is she Ophelia? Is she a human, is she a mermaid? Is she having fun or is she drowning…what's going on?'.

I walked out of there in a total daze, with the exhibition very much in my mind, and when I got home there was a call from my agent about Disney being interested in me [for] this project which had to do with mermaids and the sea. So I wanted to get away from ghosts, but I didn't go that far because a ghost sort of handed me this project.

What happened next?

Disney sent me some preliminary material that they'd worked up…they had a basic story arc, and they had these six mermaid characters who belonged to six regions of the world – and that's one thing that really attracted me to the project as I could explore a lot of different cultures throughout this one story. They sent me some art, and that also really hooked me…it was, for me at least, a very new interpretation of the whole mermaid folklore, it wasn't a mermaid sitting on a rock, combing her hair, clamshell bikini top.

These mermaids were drawn from nature, some had features, for example, of a leafy sea dragon, or an octopus or a stingray, and they were drawn with this great sensitivity toward Nature. That really spoke to me, I really loved that aspect of the project; so we met, we talked, we took each others measure; I really wanted to do it, they really wanted me to do it and so it was a go.

Was this always going to be four books, or did it start out as one and grow?

It was going to be three books, but I wrote so much that it got expanded; the first two are written and two more still have to be written.

Were the drawings that you saw similar to the ones in the video trailer for *Deep Blue*?*

They were getting there, they were some early iterations, and [Disney] went through many iterations until they had what they wanted. I'm a writer who had, before this project, holed up in an office to do a book, and wrote like mad and then came out two years later all pale and dazed. It was a very lonely process, and now I have this collaboration for the first time, somebody to bounce ideas off all along the way.

Disney has this incredible tradition of illustration and they used their artists, harnessed them for this project, sending art back and forth to me, and it was so inspiring and magical to see the [characters and environment] progress. I loved that part of the process, of the collaboration.

How much influence have you had on the story arc itself, or you were presented with something finished which you then had to make come to life?

Oh, I had quite a bit of leeway…they had their basic storyline which they wanted followed: They wanted the six mermaids, they wanted it to be very global in scope, and they wanted a classic hero's journey, a good-versus-evil story. So that could not be deviated from, which was fine, but for the rest of it they were interested in seeing what I could bring; the more I brought, the happier they were, and that's not to say that everything I brought worked, but it was very collaborative, it was up to me to flesh out that story and bring it to life.

[*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOBEH192zcE]

For me it was a major departure, to read something like this coming from you, in terms of age range, obviously, and type of story; did it take you long to get into the style and the voice?

It did, yes…when you write historical novels you are bound by the rules of history and this common body of knowledge which we all share, and you can't deviate from it. Suddenly I could do anything, anything! It was almost overwhelming and intimidating; I had to calm myself down and think, 'OK, well…it's a fantasy world, and yet magic has rules and magic has logic, but what are they?'. I had to set up that universe and I also had come up with a mythology that explained the origins of the merfolk…where did they come from, how did they happen and what was their system of gods and goddesses? I had to invent all that and it was great fun.

You must have created 'Jennifer's Rules' – what could and could not happen in this world – and I wondered if you ever came across instances, mid-book, where you thought 'Ooops, I'm going to have to re-write this rule'?

Yes! That happens to me all the time, though…with historical novels and with fantasy novels there's always that 'Oops!' moment where you have to go back because you've broken established rules. In this case there was my own personal system of magic: What is the magic? What can it do, what can it not do? How can it be used for good or evil? That was really fascinating to me, that was completely brand new, and daunting…I have to say, daunting as well.

Along with the all the mythology you created, there's also so much else: merfolk biology, their society, language and history…

That's why I wrote four books instead of three. There is so much to talk about, and I am so very much a more-is-more girl; I don't like skinny books, and I want stuff going on and I want descriptions and I want my reader to feel very, very well fed, after they come away from one of my novels.

I noticed that throughout the book you use Latin, Greek and in one case, with the character Abbadon, Hebrew words; was this something you brought to the storytelling?

Yes, it was absolutely my choice; I love history, so I'm always looking backwards and the merfolk were borne of Atlantis's destruction. I explain in the book that the best and brightest of the ancient world came to Atlantis, people from all corners of the world speaking all different languages. When the great evil destroyed Atlantis they went into the water and with the help of magic and the intercession of a god became these marine creatures, but still retaining their human memories and voices.

So there's this big mix of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and then more modern languages - the realm that the main character, Serafina, is from is so close to Venice and Italy that they have this very Latin/Italian heritage and bearing. There is a cross-cultural influence going on all the time between Mer and human, even though there is also a lot of wariness.

As well as the history, there's also a strong ecological feel, isn't there.

It was crystal clear to me from the moment I opened the handbook [Disney] sent over, and I saw that everything was taken from Nature, from the ocean…it was a total dovetailing of their ideas and mine. We were completely aligned. One of the things I want the readers to do is love these characters and love what they love, which is their home…the oceans and the rivers and all the creatures in them.

The Praedatori characters, to me, seemed like Greenpeace.

Yeah, they are…I think the Wave Warriors are like Greenpeace on land and the Praedatori are their counterpart in the ocean…as we all know, the ocean is under a huge threat right now, and I'm hoping to bring that out to a young generation of readers. Get them to care about the ocean as well.

My favourite concepts are the character Rorrin Drol's ability to taste fear, doubt, insecurities, anxiety and failure, and also your comment that what marks childhood is a lack of fear. Have you been able to stand back and allow your daughter the freedom to be fearless?

Yes…I do try and back off, when she's jumping her pony or climbing a tree, but almost what I worry about more is this internal fear, rather than the external threats to her; she's ten, but it's already starting. They start to turn a little bit when they become tweens, and it's 'How do I look, do I measure up? Am I tall enough, am I pretty enough?'. All this self-doubt starts. I see, with her and her friends, that it's changing, and I want these children, as they become young women, to stay strong and not listen to those voices, which you do when you start looking in the mirror as a young one.

Ah, the mirror…mirrors are such very spooky, scary things in *Deep Blue*, with the vitrina and of course Rorrim Drol. Are we going to see more of him in the rest of the series?

Yes, you will; Rorrim makes a reappearance in Book 2, I won't tell you what happens, and I'm glad he came back as I'm quite fond of him…I like him a lot.

He's quite evil.

He is evil, he's scary…he's dreadful, he's malicious, but he is fascinating.

Something of a Dickensian character, really.

He's whispering in your ear, telling you all the things you're not, all the things you've screwed up and all the things you'll never be. That's one of the worst things you can do to a human being, and that's what he does.

Did having the story take place underwater ever hamper the storytelling?

I had to keep remembering we were underwater. It was constantly on my mind, absolutely, which can be burdensome, in that you have to get it right, but it's also so much fun to be there, to see and touch what they're touching and to invent. I very much imagined myself within the characters…I try and shape-shift as a writer, no matter who I'm writing, and be inside them; I report back to myself, if that makes any sense, see what they're seeing, touch what they're touching.

So, Book 1 in the series is *Deep Blue*, what are the titles of the other books?

Book 2 is called *Rogue Wave*, Book 3 is called *Dark Tide* and I'm embarrassed to say that I cannot remember what Book 4 is called - and that may be because we haven't figured out the title yet, as we have gone back and forth on a few but haven't got it nailed down.

But do you know what the end of this quartet is going to be?

I know the end, but what I don't know yet is who is going to come along – like the evil character Rorrim Drol just popped up and I'm hoping more of those are going to come to me, as well as twists and turns to the plot, of course. And an epic battle, all of which is coming together in my head.