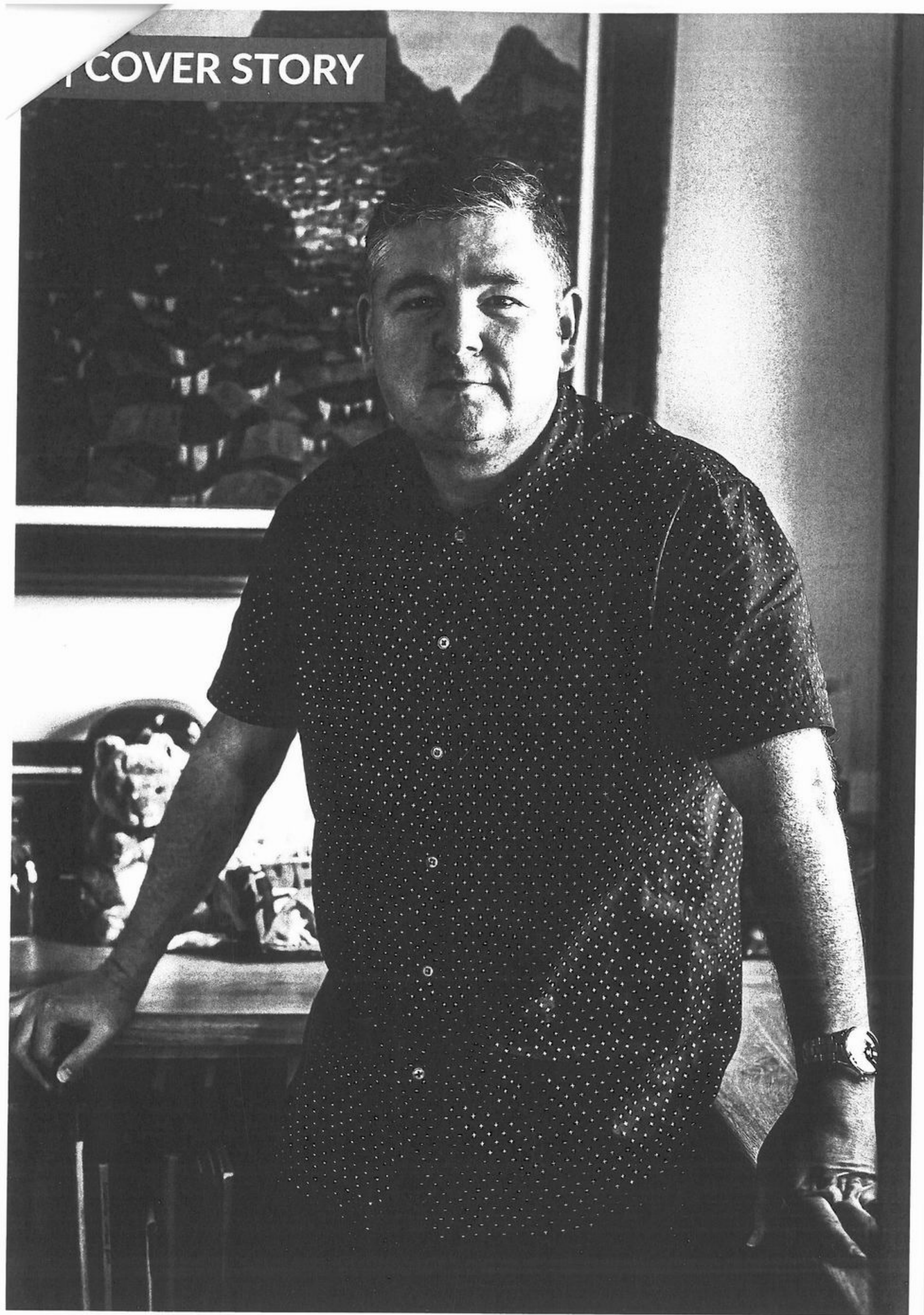




Darren Shan
THE MASTER OF HORROR

COVER STORY



Darren Shan | The Master of Horror

Outside the depths of the city, hidden beneath the hills, across the dark damp fields and over the stony walls sits the Master of Horror in his spooky lair. OK, it's not quite that dramatic but it is almost Halloween. It's more like: Nestled in the village of Pallaskenry, overlooking a beautiful view of the River Shannon, sits an artistically unique abode where you can find multimillion selling horror author Darren O'Shaughnessy, more commonly known as Darren Shan.

Born in London to parents from Pallaskenry, Darren moved back to Limerick at the age of six and his relationship with writing had already begun. As his mother was a teacher, he was always writing stories but the older he got, the more this love grew as did his commitment to nurture it.

"As I got older, the love of storytelling stayed with me. I realised that I wasn't going to be a footballer, a rock star or an astronaut but I thought I could be a writer."

We have all been kids with dreams but few of us never lose sight of that dream throughout our turbulent adolescence, never mind the reality of adulthood but Darren never swayed from his plan to be a writer.

"I was determined. I used to drive my parents mad because they were delighted I had a goal but I never really was an exceptional student or anything because I spent more time reading and wasn't interested in other careers and wasn't interested in doing something that was going to make me money."

By his early teens, Darren was writing in his spare time and by his early twenties, he had his first book published. Called "Ayuamarca" and later republished as "Procession of the Dead", it was the first of a trilogy for adults and enjoyed some success. Darren also started writing a children's book during this time. It was something he always wanted to do and he had studied Children's Literature as part of his degree. This was to be the start of great things for Darren Shan as he was writing the book that shot him to fame, Cirque du Freak. But it was far from instant success.

"I remember the day my agent rang to say all twenty publishers had turned the book down. It was all at the same time. 'Sorry Darren, no one wants to publish your work.'...Everyone in the UK said it was no good and there would be a huge backlash against it. There had never been books like it for children; it was so very dark, so morbid. So I went for a walk around here and I said there is either one of two things here. Either all the experts are right and I should give up or they are all wrong and I've to hang in there and prove myself. I decided I was right...and I was."

It's at times like this, hearing stories like his that I have to take a moment and ask what keeps people going? After endless hours of work completing his book and not one but twenty publishers say no, it would seem like to natural thing to do would have been to seriously consider throwing in the towel or putting the pen down as the case may be.

"You've got to have that leap of faith. You've really got to believe in yourself. Hope that you are not deluded but really go for it. You can't give up. There is nothing worse than giving up because then you are always going to know inside your head you have failed. If you keep going for it you will never fail because even if you haven't been published yet, there is always the hope that you will be published and it's normally more than a hope."

Darren's trust in his ability paid off with Cirque du Freak which became an international award winning book and the first of a 12 book series called The Saga of Darren Shan. And this was only the beginning. Cirque du Freak hit the big screen and I assumed it was one of the highlights for Darren in his career but he said it wasn't really as it was always in the pipeline. It can be strange sometimes how a question you ask can reveal more about a person in their answer than expected. Here I felt I got a glimpse into the man and not the author. His humility speaks for itself.

"The biggest highlight for me in all my years of writing I have to say was the day that my agent rang me to say we'd sold the rights to Cirque du Freak, back in 1997 or '98 because it meant I could come off the dole. You know you see in these cheesy movies where you will get an actor or artist and they get their big break and they punch the air or kick their heels up? That's the only time I've ever done that because it meant for the next year or two at least I'd make minimum wage and financially justify myself to people and say 'look I wasn't deluded'... and I'd be able to afford to write full time."

Lots of people wait for their 'big break' in the creative profession but Darren clearly stood out as someone with exceptional perseverance who wasn't waiting on anyone or anything to get him where he wanted to be. That being said, he did feel a certain level of luck was involved.

"You often hear writers talking about lucky breaks and things and it always seems crazy that luck is involved but it very often can be. If Cirque du Freak had been three years earlier, my agent might very likely have had a different read of Cirque du Freak...because he had got started with Harry Potter, he had got into the mindset and into the mould and fought for Cirque du Freak."

As someone who had read some of his books as a teenager, I delighted in the fact that I got to talk to the man who first brought horror into my life many moons ago and wondered why this genre appealed to him and why they have been and continue to be so successful with children.

"I started writing a book that I hoped that I would have enjoyed reading when I was 10, 11, 12 years of age. What would have thrilled me, what would have excited me then? So I put in circus freaks, I put in vampires, a kid who gets buried alive and has to fake his own death and leave his parents. These were all things that appealed to me so I just write for myself."

Horror isn't exactly a genre that springs to mind when we think child or teenage readers and understandably obstacles presented themselves when it came to getting the books on the shelves.

"Publishers have realised their mistakes and realised that kids do like horror. There are parents who are happy to let their children read horror, where as that was another thing back in the day. It was sort of Catch 22. Because there weren't horror books that were suitable for children, parents had the view that horror books weren't suitable. I remember when Cirque du Freak came out publishers were really really nervous. W.H. Smith refused to stock it when it first came out because they were really concerned. The following year they nominated it for the book of the year award."

Darren Shan lets his young readers explore a side of fantasy and horror that they are naturally curious about. I wondered what changed in the adult world to open this world up to children.

"The books were reaching children that don't normally read and they'll read good horror books, which I like to think mine are, that aren't just about the gore and grittiness but actually trying to get children thinking about the world and their place in it and how they deal with day to day life and relationships and horror is a springboard into that and they've realised it and it's become very popular since then."

Having started writing within this genre before getting into children's literature, Darren explained the different themes between his adult and children's books.

"My adult books explore more moral grey areas. In my children's books there is always hope. Lots of bad things happen but it's about children overcoming these huge obstacles that are put in their path. The main issue that runs through every one of my children's series is that you can overcome anything in life where in my adults books, things can be a lot bleaker. I think it's good for children to have hope. By the time we get to adult stage, a lot of us start to despair about the state of the world and I think it's important to explore that and to look at society and the darker aspects of the human psyche but for the children, I try and put a bit of light in there."

According to Darren, there are many writers out there who have sold lots of books but not enough to give up the day job. I asked what advice he had for aspiring authors out there.

"To write a good story takes a lot of time and a lot of work. You've got to get experience of life; you've got to see people interacting and so on. It's normally something that takes a lot of time...You can't muck out War and Peace in 15 minutes (Laughs)... Most writers don't start to mature until they are older...Your goal should be to

write the best books you can, tell the best stories you can and see where that gets you. Sometimes there will be a market for what you write and sometimes there won't be. I was lucky I came along at a time when there was a market for vampires and demons...5 years earlier or 5 years later maybe there might not have been."

Creative process will vary from person to person but I was eager to know how Darren's worked as he is someone who has been writing since he was very young.

"You have got to do it. Every writer gets those moments of inspiration but they can come at any time or any point and there are huge gaps in between them. But also the way I find that you most kick off those creative juices is to write. The more writing you do the more you get into that zone and the more likely you are to pick up an idea and take you in some interesting directions...There are no magical secrets. The more you write, the more you learn, the better you get."

Demons and darkness aside, I couldn't help but wonder how international fame hadn't resulted in another country stealing our original gemstone. With so much of our talent abroad, why had Darren not got sucked into the vortex of emigration?

"Pallaskenry and Limerick is where my home is. I've been very lucky. I've been all around the world, I get to travel a lot and I go to London a lot so I have a flat there but this is home for me. This is where I live my life. It's great to go off and see the world but this is where I come back to...I realised as I starting travelling the world and seeing different places, there is nowhere really that can offer me anything that I cannot get in Limerick...I've never really seriously thought of anywhere else but here. When the sun shines there is nowhere like it."

It's always invigorating to meet someone who has found their passion in life but to be so committed to it from a young age and persevere like Darren did, is particularly admirable. I think we could all learn a thing or two about the importance of our dreams and not losing sight of them from this inspiring man.

Darren's latest book Zom-B Family was just out on September 25th and he will be doing a reading on Friday 31st October at 2pm in 69 O'Connell Street as part of the Bualadh Bos festival for over 12's (or the very brave under 12's).

*Interview by Mairéad Collins
Images by Tarmo Tuilit*