

Children lured by Limerick vampire writer "D. Shan"

Darren Shan trilogy to be made into Hollywood movie

VAMPIRE novelist Darren O'Shaughnessy has sold millions of books all over the world and literally made a killing out of scaring kids.

So, with Halloween fast approaching, Mary Earls decided to investigate what makes the Pallaskenry horror writer's books so ghoulishly irresistible to children.

WRITING under his alias name, Darren Shan, the 34-year-old County Limerick man's secret is that he writes books that would have appealed to him as a child.

"Kids enjoy being repulsed and I used to love feeding my own love of horror when I was young. I saw my first Dracula film when I was five or six and I loved the excitement of making myself scared - the thrill of it. I used to try and give myself nightmares and vampires were my favourite monster at the time," he said.

Born in London, Darren's parents moved back home to County Limerick when he was six years old. And moving from a block of council owned flats in London, to

released his third book, *Bec*, which featured a girl as the main character, and is set in Ireland.

Universal Studios have bought the film rights to the first three books of The Saga of Darren Shan and plan to combine them to make a single movie. A screenplay has already been written by Brian Koppelman, who did the honours on *LA Confidential* and a director is currently being sought.

His first book in the series, *Cirque du Freak*, sees Darren and his school mates sneaking out of their homes in the dead of night to go and see a travelling freak show, which features a savage wolf-man, a snake boy, a giant performing spider and unbeknownst to them

readers do read my books but "they are all a bit sheepish about it."

"I like to work as much humour into my books. And there is strong humour and sarcasm in the book

famous children's writer, JK Rowling. And

Darren said that the Harry Potter author really changed the face of children's literature in terms of publishers realising there

"I'll play ball but I really want to eat you,"

dark spooky nights in his great-grandfather's cottage in Pallaskenry, certainly fuelled his appetite for horror.

"The countryside's far eerier than the city. And there were lots of winter nights with the wind howling and no streetlights. As there were only two TV stations when I was growing up, I used to read horror books a lot. And I remember keeping myself awake at night, imagining horrible scenarios in which vampires and other assorted creatures would surround my little cottage and lay siege," he explained.

Decades on, the successful novelist still hasn't managed to shake off his fascination with vampires, ghouls, demons and freaks.

Darren started off writing adult books but after experiencing little acclaim, he turned his hand at the children's market. Now considered one of the most successful Irish writers of all time, he hasn't regretted the decision.

As he needed a new name to distance himself from his earlier adult work as Darren O'Shaughnessy, the Limerick native came up with the pen name, Darren Shan. And to make his stories seem more real and harrowing, he decided that the main character should also be called Darren Shan.

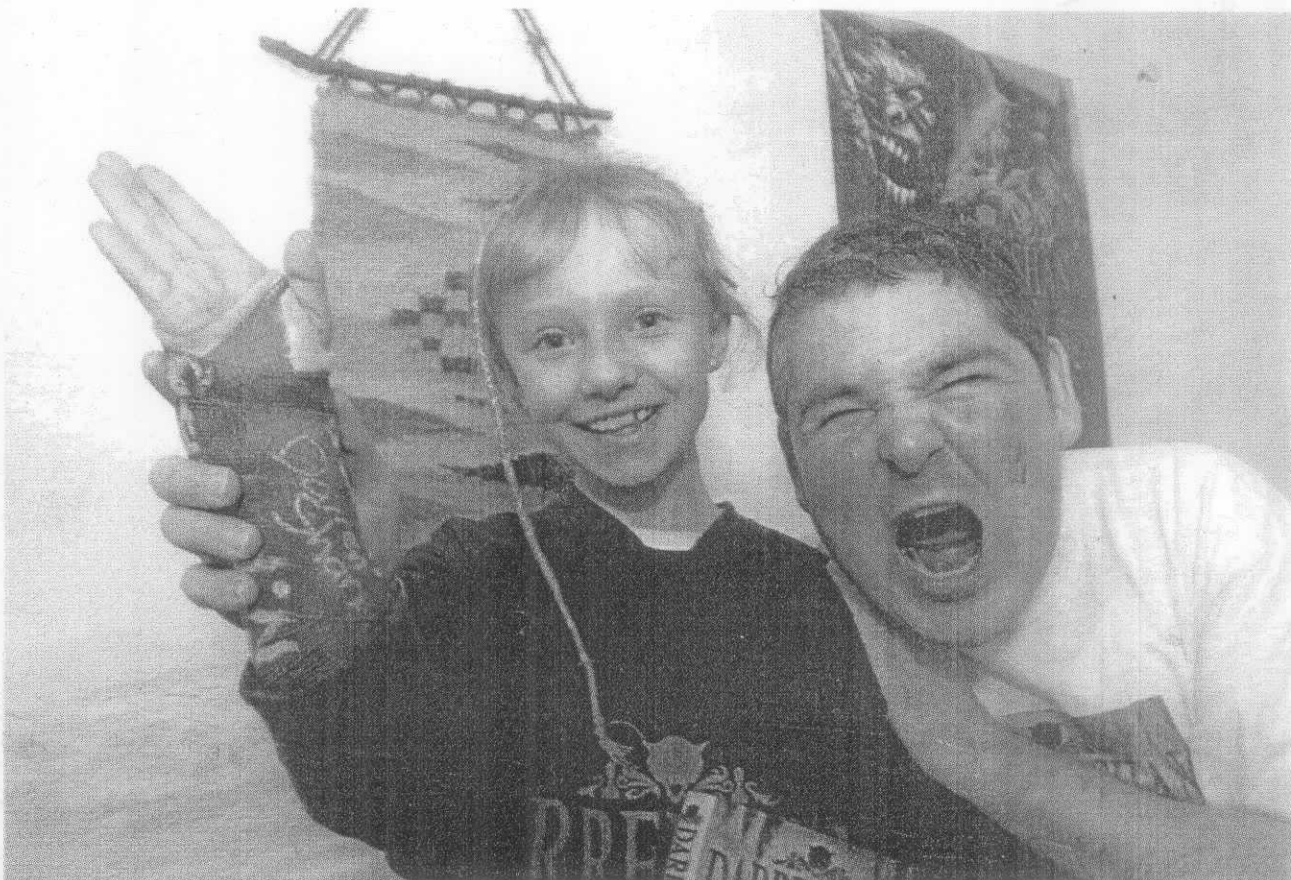
The Saga of Darren Shan is a 12 book series about a young boy's reluctant journey into a dark world of vampires. With book names like *Cirque du Freak* - A Living Nightmare, *Tunnels of Blood* and *Vampire Mountain*, kids just couldn't get enough of the grisly tales.

He has followed this up with a book series about demons called *Demonata*, and has currently just

is run by a vampire, Mr Crepsley.

Fascinated by spiders, Darren decides to try and steal the grotesque and amazing performing tarantula, Madame Octa - with some deadly consequences. The next few books in the series follow Darren's adventures as he learns the ropes of being undead, under the tutelage of the older blood-sucker - Mr Crepsley.

This writer began reading the book to a friend's son, Seán, last summer and found myself going into cold turkey when he returned home to Dublin - with the book. I was too embarrassed to buy the book for myself, but found myself more than interested to hear how it ended. When you're looking for-



9-year-old Trish Nestor from Askeaton shows off her plaster cast which was autographed by author Darren Shan at the launch of his children's horror book "Bec" at Craggaunowen Co Clare.

ward to your child's bedtime story, it has to be a good read.

I just found the characters in the book very humorous and engaging. For anyone who has the ambivalent feelings of being both repulsed and intrigued by large spiders - they will love Madame Octa.

Darren controls the tarantula by playing a flute and she will perform tricks and crawl all over you -

but if she senses fear or intimidation, she will attack you. It's like "I'll play ball but I really want to eat you," kind of attitude and is very funny.

The book also explores themes such as friendship, the importance of family, and the need to make personal sacrifices for the good of others. But not without its share of gore.

Darren said that lots of adult

as well as the scream or dark parts. I don't want the books to be totally depressing so that's why I try and put humour into it. And this appeals to adults as well as children," he said.

Although Madame Octa is one of the stars of *Cirque du Freak*, Darren is actually petrified of spiders in real life.

"When I was writing the book I pictured myself sitting in the audience of a freak show and imagined what animal would scare me the most. And a huge giant tarantula just did it for me. I had to overcome a lot of my fears of spiders, though as I was pictured with a huge giant tarantula at the launch of one of my books in London," he recalled.

The Limerick writer said that it would be fun to see Darren Shan on the big screen and he imagines an unknown actor will be picked for the starring role. But he added that he won't have any control over the movie.

Darren's biggest delight, however, is that his vampire books are appealing to children who would normally never read.

"And now they are reading two or three books a year. This is because they are reading about a subject that they are passionate about. If you give kids what they want to read - they will read it. The problem is that they are not being introduced to the right books".

His agent also works with world

was this huge market there.

Although he has lived in Limerick for most of his life, the writer still speaks with a strong English accent. But he insists that he is no blow-in to the village of Pallaskenry as the family has lived there for generations.

His parents, Liam and Breda, are from Pallaskenry but they moved to London for a while in the 1960s, where Darren was born. His mother is a primary school teacher in nearby Askeaton and his father works in the same school as a janitor.

Darren received his primary education in Askeaton, and went to secondary school at Copswood College in Pallaskenry. He then travelled back to London to study at Roehampton University.

But he is now firmly rooted in Pallaskenry, where he lives outside the village with his girlfriend, Helen Basini.

Despite his huge success, not everyone has heard of the Limerick writer, besides his legion of blood thirsty fans of course.

However, he is sold in 30 countries and has been translated into over 20 languages, making the New York Times top 10 children's best-seller list in the past. Interestingly, one of his biggest markets is Japan where his books are marketed as fantasy for slightly older female readers.

