

The Leader Interview: Darren Shan



PALLASKENRY's Darren Shan has achieved phenomenal international success as the best-selling children's author, Darren Shan and has been called Ireland's answer to JK Rowling of Harry Potter fame. Here, he talks about writing, about his success and about his life to

Norma Prendiville

New chapter in Shan saga is all fangs to hard and fast work

DARREN Shan talks as he writes. Fast. Very Fast. And he brings an unbridled enthusiasm to his words. It's one of the reasons children like him so much. He is very much one of their own. And they love the books he writes as author Darren Shan and have shown their appreciation by making him an international best-selling author with sales of 10 million books. Yes, you read that right. Ten million in 35 different countries.

From a child's point of view, Darren is good value. He writes these deliciously scary and fantastic books and there is always a new one on the way. Then when he gives a reading, he pulls out his showman skills and puts enormous energy into entertaining them and above all, into answering their questions.

"I like it," he says of what he calls public events. "I just enjoyed it from the very start. When I am on stage I get geared up. It is great fun. I think going to a writer's event can be very boring if it's

out. For Cirque du Freak, I had two images, one of a boy who meets a vampire at a circus and the second, of the boy walking into the night with the vampire and becoming his assistant. They were very strong images. It is like trying to do a jig-saw. You have this idea that gives you your first piece."

"I started writing Cirque du Freak two or three days after I had those images. But then, for example, with Beck, it took maybe a year or even two before I started writing. It varies from book to book. I tend not to write ideas down. If it is a very strong idea, it will stick. If I get an idea and it doesn't stay with me, it probably wasn't a very strong idea in the first place."

"I will let it all happen inside. Once I have it clear, I write a very brief plot outline of about one or two pages. That gives me more and more ideas, I can break the plot line down loosely into chapters. I like to build up over the course of a series with really complex plot lines."

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● International bestselling author Darren Shan, Pallaskenry, at the Belltable this week where he read extracts for hundreds of young fans

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"I like it," he says of what he calls public events. "I just enjoyed it from the very start. When I am on stage I get giddy up. It is great fun. I think going to a writer's event can be very boring if it's only just reading so I always look at it as a show, as an event."

But yes, he says, it can be a real juggling act. "Everyone in the room will have read a different amount of books, so I have to be careful not to give anything away." You have to do each reading like a self-contained extract and there may even be some who have not read any of the books.

"The difficult bit is when it comes to questions and answers." Sometimes a plot line will be spoiled, for example, if someone asks why he killed off such-and-such a character.

And is it possible to remember every character, turn and twist in 15 books? "I never pretend. I am always honest. I never try to bluff my way. Sometimes, it will take me a little bit to click... But it is all tucked away somewhere in there in my head."

But if he doesn't know or can't remember, he says so. And that sometimes gives his young readers a kick. "They love thinking, hey I know more than him."

"Kids will read books very quickly. They will re-read over and over. And because of that they will still have the first four books in their mind. An adult wouldn't pick up as much as children," he says.

Now in his 30s and a full-time writer for the past nine years, Darren, has 17 published books to his name. His first two, *Ayuamerca* and *Hell's Horizon* were for adults. But his big breakthrough came in 2000 with *Cirque du Freak*, the first of ten in the Saga series for children. This has since been followed up by a new series, *Demonata*, the fifth book of which, *Blood Beast*, was published this week and launched in Limerick.

Explaining how he writes, he says: "It always starts with a specific idea or image, normally for a scene. I picture it like a movie. I see this scene playing

out. For *Cirque du Freak*, I had two images, one of a boy who meets a vampire at a circus and the second, of the boy walking into the night with the vampire and becoming his assistant. They were very strong images. It is like trying to do a jig-saw. You have this idea that gives you your first piece."

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Darren agrees he writes fast. "I like it when my fingers are flying away." But he is very disciplined in his approach and sets a target of 3,000 words a day or ten pages which he sticks to. "I might go a little bit over or under but that is what I feel comfortable with."

"Page count encourages you to work quickly. Even if it is on a day I feel sluggish, I have this carrot at the end of the stick. At least you have a target. You have good days and bad days. The writing tends to be the same no matter how I'm feeling. You learn to write even when you are not in the mood. The difference between a professional writer and an amateur is that a professional writes even when he doesn't feel like it. I treat it like a job. You have to get the job done. While the quality of the writing is the same, on good days, it comes more easily. On bad days, I don't feel inspired but you have to force yourself to do it."

He always works a couple of years ahead. *Demonata* is planned as a series of 10 books with *Blood Beast* at number five but Darren already has a first draft of book 10 written.

"I will do a first draft very, very quickly but then I will spend up to two years revising and editing it while writing other books."

It is just the way I work. It allows me to make sure that all the books are connected and linked. I can make sure they all tie up." The books are very tightly knit.

In many ways, he explains, his life "is like having two careers". One part of it is about sitting in his rural home, tapping away at a computer, writing his daily blog, updating his website, answering his fans. The other part is when he hits the road and meets thousands of people in the course of three or four weeks.

With his books topping bestseller lists in places as far apart as Hungary

and Japan, Darren has done a lot of travelling to promote his books. "Each country is different. I have done events with an interpreter. The events are difficult to set up. I have to speak much more slowly and in shorter sentences which is not natural for me. Other times I just do signings."

The only time he found himself "struggling" on a book tour was in Hungary when hundreds upon hundreds of people turned up and he was signing books for over 10 hours. After such a marathon, everything ached.

"I say to kids who are interested in writing, it is hard work. It is still a job. It would be lovely to think you just get inspired but I have to work hard to make the stories work, to give them that flow."

But mostly this thirtysomething, who reckons he's just a big kid at heart, cannot believe his own good fortune.

"I am very very lucky. I am doing the job I love doing."

But, he continues: "I say to kids who are interested in writing, it is hard work. It is still a job. It would be lovely to think you just get inspired but I have to work hard to make the stories work, to give them that flow."

For all that, he says, his life sometimes feels bizarre even to him. "This isn't really an ordinary life," he has

found himself thinking at times.

What he is absolutely certain about is that he always wanted to be a writer.

"Even when I was five or six, I always wanted to be a writer. Of course I wanted to be other things too, an astronaut, a football player, the Six Million Dollar Man, but being a writer was what I wanted to be more than anything else."

He got his first typewriter at 14 and through his teens was busy writing stories, comic strips, books, writing after school, at weekends, during holiday.

"I was not quite 17 when I did the

So he decided to give himself a year to see if he could make it as a full-time writer, working from his parents' home in Pallaskenry.

Getting an agent quite quickly at the time was a huge help. "That was very exciting. It was a vindication. Most writers don't show their work to friends and family and they don't really know if you are really doing it or are you faking it. Nobody believes it until they see it."

Seeing his first book, *Ayuamerca*, an adult book, in print was a great feeling but while it, and the second, *Hell's Horizon*, were well received, they did not sell in big numbers. Meantime, however, Harper and Collins decided to go with *Cirque du Freak*, which had been turned down by 20 other publishers.

"It happens all the time. Harry Potter was turned down at first too. Publishers always say to young writers we are looking for something new or something different, but then they worry it won't sell. There are lots of great writers out there whose books don't sell. Your aim has to be to write the best book you can. You can't write for money."

"As a start-out writer, you don't get very much money. When Harper Collins went with *Cirque du Freak*, I realised I am going to make minimum wage this year and that meant I could afford to write full-time. It was amazing, brilliant, being able to make enough so I didn't have to get another job."

What happened next was the stuff of dreams. *Cirque du Freak* took off in a big way, the others followed and Universal Studios are still planning to make a film out of the first three Saga books.

"It is still looking positive but I have no control over it. I know the writer is just a little cog. If it happens, it will be a bonus. I hope they do a good job and that it brings more readers."

Darren's success has allowed him to travel more for his own enjoyment, to get a full-size screen and projector for the films he loves to watch, to get to his beloved Tottenham Hotspur matches and to move into his own home outside Pallaskenry. "I have done very, very comfortably out of the books but people imagine crazy figures and things tend to get exaggerated."

"There is a lot of luck involved in being successful," he continues. "Sometimes, it's about being in the right place at the right time. My agent is the same agent as JK Rowling and he was interested in getting other children's books at the time." In the end, though, he says, the only measure of success has to be that you write a really good book.

He reads less these days, explaining that it is hard to concentrate on more words when your day is already taken up with words. But he catches up when travelling. He also spends time these days with his girlfriend of five years, Bas, who works with the charity "No Strings" and who is currently finishing a Masters in Development at UL. "We met through work," he explains. "She was putting together a book of stories for the charity and she came to one of my events looking for a story from me."

Darren is also sure of one other thing. Pallaskenry is home. "This is where I am from." His grandparents and parents, Liam and Breda, are from the area and he grew up there from the age of six when the family moved back from London. "I loved the freedom of it," he recalls and he has very happy memories of his schooldays at Copsewood College. "I got to enjoy my education," he says.

"The good thing about living in Pallaskenry is that I am just Darren Shan. When I am here I am part of the community. I have no real sense of me being 'changed'."

