

Darren Shan

B I O G R A P H Y

Darren O'Shaughnessy was born on 2 July 1972 in London. After starting school at the age of three, he moved to Limerick with his parents and younger brother. He went back to London to study Sociology/English at college. Darren worked for a cable television company for 2 years before setting up as a full time writer. He had his first taste of literary success aged 15 when he was runner-up in a television script-writing competition with a comedy script titled, '*Day in the Morgue*'. Darren completed his first book aged 17.

A big film buff, he also reads lots of adult-orientated indy comics. Other interests include long walks, outdoor swimming, watching and discussing football, scuba-diving . . . and dreaming up new ways to terrify his readers!

Cirque Du Freak is Darren first children's book. It is about something out of the ordinary, but set against the background of children's normal lives to chilling effect. J.K Rowling describes it as, 'A compelling book . . . a plot full of twists which leaves the reader hungry for more.' The TES describe the book as, 'a compelling page-turner.'

When interviewed in T2, Darren comments, 'It's not a book that sets out to be frightening for the sake of it. Dark things happen, but they happen for a reason, and there are definitely repercussions.'

The sixth book in The Saga of Darren Shan, *The Vampire Prince* is published in February 2002.



‘Darren Shan is undoubtedly a literary find for children. Still in his twenties, he has produced a genuinely original story that combines near-horror with mainly good-humoured, everyday reality.’

THE INDEPENDENT

An interview with Darren Shan

Shan was born in London in 1972 but at an early age he moved to Limerick with his parents and younger brother. He returned to London to study Sociology and English and then worked for a TV cable company. *Cirque du Freak* is his first novel for children.

Where did the idea for *Cirque du Freak* come from?

It started one day when I was looking for a Goosebumps book. And I was reminded of how excited I would've been by Goosebumps if I were reading them and I was 10 or 11 years old. At the same time I could see how they lacked the depths of something like say the Secret Garden or more literary books. So I thought it would be nice if there was a book out there that combined the two - that had the excitement of the Goosebumps books but that hit you on a deeper level as well. The idea just started spinning through my thoughts and gradually became *Cirque du Freak*. I wasn't really sure how it was gonna turn out because I hadn't written this sort of stuff before.

In the introduction the narrator says, 'really life's nasty, it's cruel.' *Cirque du Freak* is clearly a story with a message – you're not trying to break it to children gently, are you?

No I think it's good to explore that. Just last Thursday the phone rang when I was at home; my father had been in an accident at work and cut off a piece of his finger. He was OK, he got it wrapped up but that could happen any time. I think it's good to have children aware of that. Most books finish up with a happy ending, nobody gets hurt, and everything goes back to the way it was. But of course real life isn't like that. So we should go away and reflect on it and maybe be grateful for what we have. We tend to take our parents for granted, especially when we're young and they're a bit of a nuisance but we've got to tolerate them, and hopefully people will go away from reading *Cirque du Freak* and think, "Wow, I'm lucky, I'd better count my blessings while I've got them".

So of all the freaks that are in the circus, which was the most fun to invent? Was it Alexander Rib, Rhamus Twobellies, Gertha Teeth, the Twisting Twins...?

I loved developing all of them. I didn't want to write about real circus freaks; I didn't want it to be an exploitative thing. I wanted to create magical beings, and so I was trying to come up with stuff that was weird and wonderful. That was great fun. Rhamus Twobellies was lots of fun. But I also enjoyed creating the Wolf Man, who gets his hand sawn off and sewn back on again.

That was gruesome. The *Cirque du Freak* is kind of modelled on a normal circus but in a sense it's pretty radically different as well, isn't it? What is so special about it?

It's a place of magic. Normally you hear about a freak show and it's a horrible place to go. This has the reputation of a freak show, everyone goes to it expecting it to be awful. And it is terrifying but in a magical way. When people come away they're excited about it, they're not coming away thinking about people locked up in cages or people being mistreated. They come out with a real buzz, like a terrifying horror movie that gives you a real tingle.

Mr Crepsley is rather different from the normal idea that we have of a vampire. What is so different about him?

I wanted to play with the whole idea of vampires. It starts off with Darren and Steve who both have their own ideas about what

vampires are. They think he's a nasty creature of the night, they believe in all the old myths. I wanted to explode that a bit and have a vampire who was kind of human, we don't really know that much about vampires and it was a debatable thing, so I could explore it even more and discover what vampires are really like and how they live their life. Completely different from the old tradition.

Darren is persuaded to stay in the house to try and rescue Steve even though he knows Steve is guaranteed to get him into trouble. What makes him stay behind?

Well because they are friends and because he likes Steve a lot. Even if he knows Steve is wild, he wants to be there to help him and also to find out what was going on. Because at that stage Darren doesn't know why Steve was staying. Darren is a very, very curious character. He's got this inbred curiosity and he's always eavesdropping on people trying to find out what's going on. So it's partly friendship and partly curiosity as to what is happening.

To what extent would you say the characters are based on real people? Is the Darren Shan of the story you?

Well, it's all true of course! Yeah a lot of me is in Darren Shan. There are bits of me in Steve. When I was a kid I used to be pretty wild, everyone thought I was going to end up and be a bad lot. So I suppose part of that was brought out in Steve. I took quite a lot from real life but I gave it a twist to keep it separate. It's not autobiographical but there are bits of me in it.

Are you afraid of spiders?

I'm not really afraid of spiders, but I have a dislike for them. Normally, if I found a spider, I would squish it, since I've written this if I find spider I pick it up and guide it out. I feel as if I have a bond with them. I'm actually getting closer to the spiders. I'm having a party tonight and there'll be a few tarantulas there for people to hold.

***Cirque du Freak* is the first in the series, isn't it? How long will this be?**

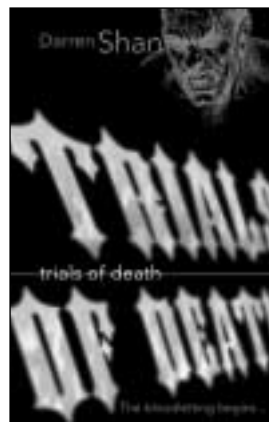
Somewhere in the region of twenty-four, twenty-five books. A big long series. I've finished the first eight, so I'm writing another nine soon. I know the overall arc of the story but I don't plan it out book by book until I actually reach each segment. I don't like to work too far ahead. If I work this way and I find stuff in book eight I can go back and put it into book two or three. If I find new characters I can put in little clues and things.

I, for one, am looking forward to hearing more about it. You got a great review from J.K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter. That must be a tough one to live up to. Do you think its frightening to be told that from someone who is so incredibly successful?

It's very nice, it's wonderful to get something like that. I had a child write to me about *Cirque du Freak*, and it's great to get any sort of feedback from anyone. But to get to it from J.K. Rowling, that's pretty special.

Darren Shan

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