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### An Interview with Horror Author Darren Shan

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An Interview with Horror Author Darren Shan

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Jeffery Klaehn  
Independent Scholar | Canada

Darren O'Shaughnessy was born in England in 1972 and resides in Limerick, Ireland. Writing under his Darren Shan pen name, he is the author of the 12-book young adult series, "The Saga of Darren Shan" (also known as the *Cirque du Freak* series) as well as the 10-book *Demonata* and 12-book *Zom-B* series. He is also the author of *Lady of the Shades*, *The Thin Executioner*, and the "City Book Trilogy" (*Procession of the Dead*, *Hell's Horizon*, and *City of the Snakes*). Under his Darren Dash pen name, he is the author of *The Evil and the Pure* and *Sunburn*. This interview covers a range of topics and issues, including the impact of "The Saga of Darren Shan" on the landscape of young adult horror, his writing process, and our collective fascination with the dark and mysterious.

Horror (fiction) | Darren Shan |  
Young Adult Horror | Storytelling



Photo: Tarmo Tulit | <http://tarmotulit.com> | Photo courtesy of Darren Shan

Jeffery Klaehn: When did you first become interested in horror?

DS: I've loved horror as long as I can remember. One of my earliest memories is of watching a *Dracula* movie on television when I was five or six years old. I can place it to that time because I was still living in London, and I moved back to Ireland when I was six. Even then, I already loved horror, so I must have been exposed to it even before I caught that film. From that point on I never really looked back. I'd watch as many horror films as I could (there was normally one on Irish television on a Friday or Saturday night) and read collections of scary short stories. Then, in my teens, I pushed myself much further, watching films on video, moving up to adult horror novels, and reading horror comics too. I watched all sorts of other movies too, and read all different types of books, but horror was my first love and it excited me the most.

JK: Which horror comics did you enjoy reading? Were there any favorite titles or stories you remember?

DS: I'd manage to catch an occasional horror comic as a child, but not many made their way to Limerick. As a teenager I loved *Sandman*. I dipped in and out of *Hellblazer* over the years, though I really only fully enjoyed the Garth Ennis run. One of the comics that had the biggest impact on me was an anthology called *Taboo*, in which *From Hell* by Alan Moore started life. It used to feature a fascinating array of horror stories, one-offs as well as series, and it's much missed.

JK: You're a specialist in young adult horror – in writing *Cirque Du Freak* and subsequent "Saga of Darren Shan" novels, how did you approach the practical construction of frightening elements?

DS: The horror elements are usually the easiest parts of a book to write. Fear is a universal constant. I think almost all of us have experienced fear of one kind or another, real or imaginary, whether it's the monster under our bed, or the serial killer we're sure is stalking us on the streets, illness in ourselves or our loved ones, financial worries ... It's an easy thing to tap into as a writer. The key thing for me is to make the horror merely a part of the story I'm telling. I know, if I put in a character in a worrying position, readers will empathize and be interested in what happens next. It's that "what happens next" that appeals most to me. "OK, I've got their interest, now where do I want to take them?" A good horror book is never just about the scares.

JK: How do you define “a good story,” in terms of your own craft?

DS: I think ultimately it’s all a question of personal taste. I don’t think writers have any greater understanding of what makes “a good story” than readers do. I usually judge it by how well I feel I’ve done by my original idea. Sometimes I have an idea that I think will really blow readers away, and if it doesn’t do that in the end, I feel that the book isn’t a complete success, even if readers think differently. For instance, I wrote a book called *Slawter* that proved a big hit with my fans; many cite it as one of their favorite books of mine. But as popular as it’s been, I wanted it to do even more than it did, and to me it will always feel like a bit of a missed opportunity. As good as it is based on the feedback I’ve received from readers, in my head, at its conception, it had the potential to be even better, and I’m sorry I wasn’t able to realize my vision. Then again, if I had, maybe the readers wouldn’t have liked it as much!

JK: In what ways has the “horror landscape” changed since your formative years?

DS: Well, I grew up in the 1980s, when we had the whole video nasty hysteria. I remember reading humorous pieces in the 80s and early 1990s in which the writers joked about films like *The Evil Dead* or *A Clockwork Orange* being shown on regular television channels in the future, without any fuss. At the time that seemed like a complete fantasy. I thought horror would always be an underground movement, an acquired taste rather than something that would gain wider appeal. Don’t get me wrong — I thought horror *should* be more popular, and I rejoiced when writers like Stephen King or Clive Barker, or a film like *Silence of the Lambs*, broke through into the mainstream, but the powers-that-be were stacked so firmly against the horror genre that it was hard to imagine that scenario shifting hugely. Yet here we are, and the wall *has* crumbled, and while horror is still mostly the pleasurable domain of the outsider, at least now we have genuine choice and accessibility, to watch and read what we want.

JK: What was the marketplace for horror aimed at young adult readers like prior to the publication of *Cirque Du Freak*?

DS: It was very limited. In fact I don’t think it existed as such, not where a book like *Cirque Du Freak* was concerned. There was a marketplace for a simpler style of horror book, aimed at younger children — *Goosebumps* and *Point Horror* were very popular, and publishers knew what to do with that type of book, having spent a long time ignoring the children’s and YA horror market completely. But *Cirque Du Freak* was a much darker and troubling book (even if it seems rather mild when compared with a lot of my later work). My agent submitted it to twenty different publishers in the UK (pretty

much everyone, in other words) and it was unanimously rejected. Not a single publisher wanted to touch it with a bargepole. Luckily my agent pushed hard, and because he was also J. K. Rowling’s agent and the Harry Potter books were beginning to make waves (this was 1997) he was able to schedule a few meetings with some of the publishers, to discuss the situation. The editor at HarperCollins, a lady called Domenica De Rosa, read the manuscript a second time ahead of our meeting, and this time it clicked. She made some good suggestions for tweaking it, I did another rewrite, and she signed me on. Then she went off on maternity leave, ended up not returning, and her replacement promptly tried to sell the rights back to us! Since they couldn’t, they published it after sitting on it for a couple of years, and happily during that time some of the in-house staff read it and loved it, and a movie company got interested, and we started selling it in other markets, and things kind of grew from there. But it does make me smile, when I see a new horror author described as “the next Darren Shan,” because the entire trade didn’t want the first Darren Shan!



Photo: Tarmo Tuli | <http://tarmotuli.com> | Photo courtesy of Darren Shan

JK: In what ways do you think the marketplace for young adult horror fiction has changed since then?

DS: Publishers are less fearful of parent, teacher and librarian reaction. Book stores are also more willing to include horror titles in their children's sections — although, having said that, my *Zom-B* books did get bumped from the shelves of one major supermarket chain in the UK, when mothers complained about the fifth book, *Zom-B Baby*, being placed next to copies of *Peppa Pig*! But, for the most part, horror has become far more acceptable. When *Cirque Du Freak* was first released, WHSmith refused to stock it. The following year, they nominated it for their Children's Book of the Year award! So I think the change happened quickly. Someone just needed to dip their toes in the YA horror waters and prove that true darkness in a children's book wouldn't lead to riots and copies of the book being burnt. I just happened to be the willing guinea pig.

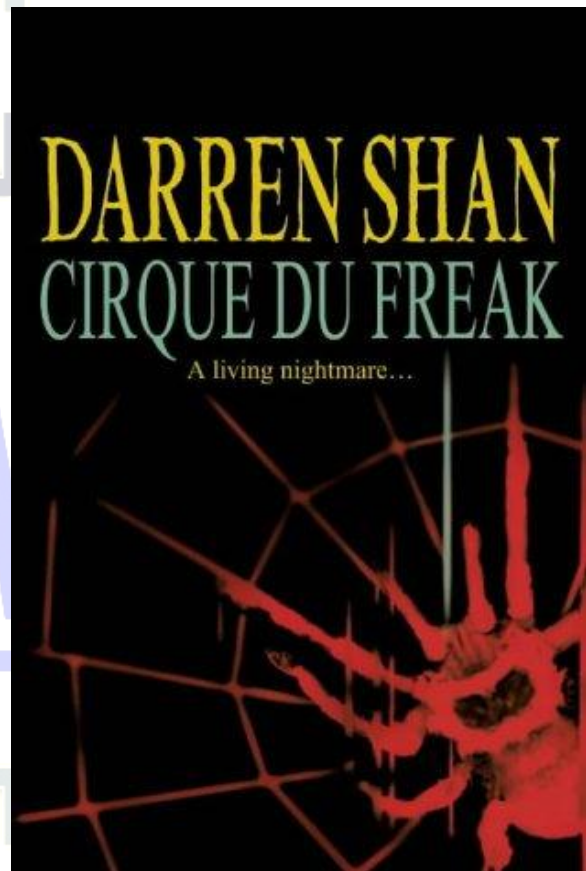
JK: You wrote in a range of genres throughout the early stages of your career. What made you decide to focus on horror, vampires and demons?

DS: I've covered all sorts of genres in my time, and continue to mix and match, but my fascination with the darkness of the human condition has been an almost constant, bar a few lighter works that have yet to see print.

My vampire series isn't actually horror per se, just a very dark adventure story, but because it featured vampires and had a morbid tone, it got sold in most markets as a straight-up horror book. Alternately, I published a crime novel last year under my adult pseudonym (Darren Dash), and even though that wasn't sold as horror, it's probably the most horrific book I've put forward. One of the things I enjoy most about the horror genre is that it's fluid and flexible. For me, horror isn't simply limited to books that are traditionally scary, but encapsulates all those works that take us into the darker areas of the human existence, and which challenge us to look into the less seemly corners of the universe. I've always wanted to be a horror writer, and probably always will want to explore the darkness, but at the same time I want to bring new things to the table, not just play safe and regurgitate old ideas. My books are horror, fantasy, thriller, sci-fi, romance, all at the same time, and I like it that way. But the horrific elements underlie everything else. Why? Because. Just because . . .

JK: As the first book in "The Saga of Darren Shan" series, *Cirque Du Freak* has had a major impact both on your own career trajectory and on the world of young adult publishing. How would you characterize your conception of the vampire historically, within the continuum of vampires in popular culture?

DS: Vampires have been slotted into every sort of story — they've been monsters, figures of romance, action heroes. Personally, I love that they're so versatile. They're a way of looking at ourselves through the lens of dark fantasy, to assess what we'd be like if we lived longer and were more powerful and more open to our darker drives. Humankind has been playing with those ideas since the dawn of consciousness, and for me horror is a safer forum for that than religion. Christians gave us the concept of Satan, and because it was taken as real, he's brought true terror and misery into the lives of millions of people. Bram Stoker gave us Dracula, and he's brought enjoyable shivers and grisly entertainment into the lives of millions more. I prefer horror to religion, not least because our demons can change and be adapted over the years, to reflect not only our fears and dark desires, but our positive sides too. Vampires can be evil, twisted villains, but they can also be moral, conscientious heroes... just like us.



JK: You named the lead character of *Cirque Du Freak* "Darren Shan," which then became your pen name. What influenced this decision?

DS: Well, it was all a true story . . . I've always written for adults as well as younger readers, and the first book I



actually published was for adults. That was released under my real name, Darren O'Shaughnessy. I decided to use a pseudonym when writing for children, so that my adult books wouldn't be stocked alongside my YA work. (My publishers convinced me to re-release some of my adult books under the Darren Shan banner in later years, which I regret, and I've now stopped doing that.) I came up with the name of Darren Shan, but then I paused. I knew I was going to start the book by saying it was a true story, and I figured if I used the name of Darren Shan for the character as well, it would blur the lines between fantasy and reality, and allow readers to suspend their sense of disbelief and more fully enter into the world of the story and treat it as if it was part of the real world. It seems to have worked a treat – I still get emails and letters from fans asking if the story is really true. And the thing is, if you read all the way to book twelve, *Sons of Destiny*, you find out that it could be . . .

JK: Your website affords readers access to vast amounts of writing and information while encouraging interaction and fostering sense of community –

DS: I started out as a fan. The internet wasn't around in my day, so it was hard to find out about the authors I loved, but I read any article that caught my eye, and went to comic conventions and signing sessions for horror writers. I loved it when authors made themselves accessible, and were nice when I met them. I decided very early on that if my books ever got published, I wanted to be one of the guys who genuinely likes meeting their fans, who's happy to sign all their books and write a little dedication and chat with them for a minute or two and pose for a photo. Then, when the internet came along, I saw the opportunities that it presented to let my fans get even closer if they wished, to publish material exclusively online, and tell them more about myself, and let them into my world. It's not an essential part of the Darren Shan experience – the books are what matter most, and if you just read those, you're getting the best part of me – but it's a nice bonus, and a lot of my followers like visiting my site and hearing from me on Facebook and Twitter. It humanizes me and lets them see that I'm no different to them, struggling away on my books, trying to enjoy life and juggle work with leisure time. Some fans prefer the mystery, and in that case I strongly advise them to avoid my site at all costs, as the sight of their favorite horror author sunbathing or pulling faces at his young son are just too distressing and can scar them for life.

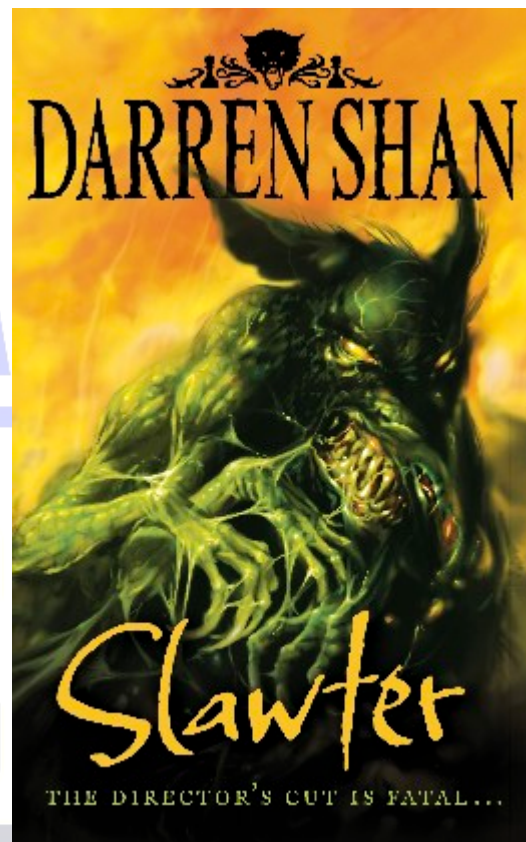
JK: Who were some of *your* favorite horror authors as you were growing up?

DS: Stephen King has been the constant. I read *Salem's Lot* at a very young age (I think maybe 10 or 11) and I've been following him avidly ever since. I liked *Interview with a Vampire*, though I never got into any of Anne Rice's other

work. James Herbert was a lot of grisly fun. Clive Barker had a huge impact on me, and I spent a lot of my teens writing over-the-top content (OTT), fantastically visceral stories, trying in many ways to emulate what he had created in his best work. Then I discovered Jonathan Carroll, one of the most underrated of horror fantasists, and his books steered me towards easing up on the out-and-out gore, and trying to make my work more imaginative and genre-blurring.

JK: "The Demonata" was published as a 10-book series throughout 2005-2010. How would you describe the series to someone who has yet to discover it?

DS: [Laughs] I wish I could! On the one hand *The Demonata* is a simple tale of good versus evil. Demons from an alternate universe are trying to take over our world, and a small group of magicians are all that stand in their way. The novels follow three teenagers who have different magical powers, and who come together to combat the forces of darkness. But there's far more going on than that description can cover. For instance, the teenagers start off living in different times (one in the present, one about thirty years ago, and one in Celtic Ireland); one is stricken with a werewolf gene; it takes in time travel and a trip across our universe. It's a big, crazily ambitious story, very easy to read, but almost impossible to succinctly surmise.



JK: How would you characterize your philosophy as an author?

DS: Work hard. Keep trying new things. Always push forward and look ahead to the next challenge. Never sit on your laurels. Don't be afraid to write something that everybody will hate. Take risks. Believe in your talent and make that your focus. Never worry about what the market is doing or how sales are going. If you get lucky, you might sell loads of books and make a fortune, but some of the finest writers make a pittance from their books, and that's just the way the cookie crumbles. In an ideal world, you'll produce quality work and make the bestseller lists, but if you have to choose, always choose quality, because (much like flesh and bone) money comes and money goes and is quickly forgotten, but a great story can stand proudly as a monument to your imagination and dedication forever.



Photo: Tarmo Tulit | <http://tarmotulit.com> | Photo courtesy of Darren Shan

JK: How do you typically move from ideas to stories?

DS: I let an idea percolate in my brain for a time before moving forward. Sometimes that might be a few days, but more usually it's a matter of months or even years. During that time I return to the idea and mentally poke at it, asking

questions, trying to attach it to other ideas, to get an idea of how it will stretch out in the writing process. When more ideas start to gather around it, I'll then get to a point where I feel ready to sit down and write up a plot outline. I'm always astonished by how much comes out when I do that. I can sit down with just a very vague overview of a plot in the morning, but when I start jotting the ideas down, the structure tends to fall very quickly into place, and by evening I often have a complete plot outline which will guide me in the writing process, or at least get me started with confidence. With some books I'll write a short plot outline; with others I'll plot the story out in more detail. When I'm happy with what I have on paper, I turn to my computer, open a blank Word document, and start writing.

JK: To what extent does creative association and the question of "what if?" play into your writing process?

DS: That's where everything originates. An idea can be inspired by anything. Sometimes I have a very clear link to an idea's genesis, i.e. I'll see or read something that will lead directly to a story idea, but more often than not it will rise out of my subconscious and I'll have no clear knowledge of what prompted it. But ideas are only the start, and by themselves they're redundant. I think most people have great ideas for books all the time, but what they lack is the ability to take those ideas forward. To do that, you need to become a detective and start asking questions. "What if I take the story this way?" "What if a character does *that* or *this*?" A writer's brain should be like a giant hadron collider, and it will only produce interesting data (stories) if you shoot a lot of particles (ideas) around it at top speed and see what happens when they clash. Often it's a mess, and descends into chaos, but every so often a new universe is born out of the collisions.

JK: What guides your decision-making regarding the structuring/architecture of your books?

DS: Gut instinct. I don't impose any clear plans onto my stories. I go with what feels right. I've started certain books in the third or first person, got a bit in, and decided to change it, as the story doesn't seem to be working the way I feel that it should. I have no set formulas or rules. I'm open to anything, happy to write short, fast-paced novellas, or longer, slower novels; books for children or books for adults. I love the unpredictability of the writer's mind, and rather than go with something that I know will work every time, I like to stretch myself and explore the unknown. I can even change dramatically over the course of a single series. While my books tend to get sold as straightforward horror stories, there's a lot more going on in them than my publishers ever like to allude to in public.

JK: What about characters, story structure and narrative voice?

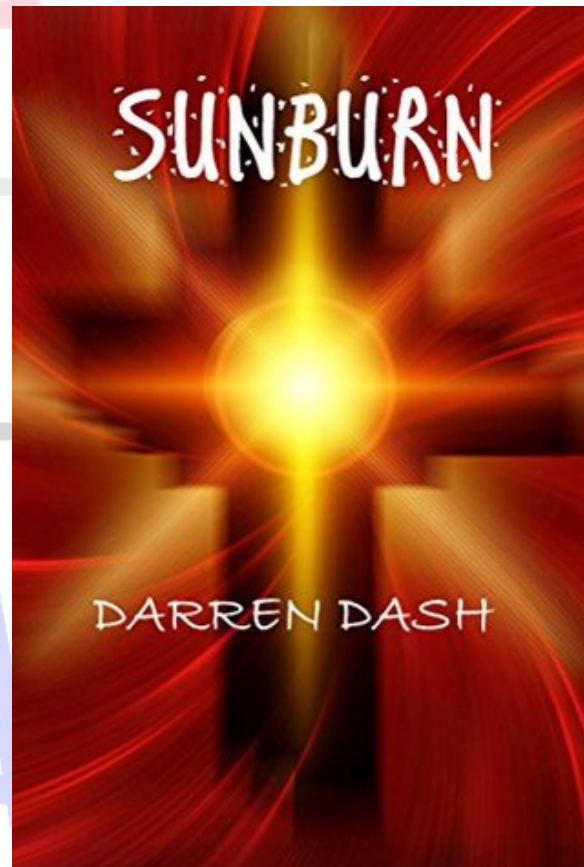
DS: I never know much about my characters when I begin a book. I like to have a plot fairly clear in mind, or at least the backbone of it, but the characters grow out of the storytelling process. I don't exactly know how that happens, and to be honest, I don't think about it too much. Over-analysis is a dangerous trait in a writer. Good stories don't happen when writers follow the rules and piece together all the different threads in a certain way. We're not in the car-making business, where there's a mould and a technique that can be applied across the board. Ideas are magic. Consciousness is one of the great mysteries of the universe: how did we become self-aware? Is it a natural quirk or due to the intervention of a higher force? Are we simply very advanced computers, and if so, are we linked together in a mental web, or do we (can we) operate independently? Storytelling is key to our mental growth as a species. Myths and legends helped us shape our brains and develop our language and make sense of and conquer the world around us. We're in the middle of a journey from ignorant darkness into knowing light (or so I like to hope). I think we gain more by asking questions and trying new things and going where that leads us, rather than repeating what we know will work. How do my characters develop? No idea. Don't care. Just enjoying the ride . . .

JK: *The Evil and the Pure* (2014) and *Sunburn* (2015) give the sense that you're moving toward the future with a view toward taking risks, exploring new possibilities. In *The Evil and the Pure* you examine horror in relation to human complexity, morality and despair. Does writing for adult audiences open up pathways to explore new dimensions of horror?

DS: Absolutely. It doesn't necessarily open up *better* paths, but it does allow you to explore things that you can't in a children's novel. For instance, in *The Evil and the Pure* I look at the horrors of a manipulative, incestuous relationship, and that's something my YA editors would never give a green card to. You can still take risks with books for younger readers – *The Demonata* was a massive risk, since it didn't fit the normal structures of a series, and *Cirque Du Freak* was a risk, since there was nothing else like it in the marketplace, which made it very hard to place – and sometimes those risks can be every bit as disturbing and ground-breaking as those in an adult book. But you can be more open about the darkness if you're writing for adults.

JK: You've done many speaking engagements where you've had extensive interaction with your audience(s) over the years – what do children, as opposed to your adult fans, tell you about your work?

DS: The responses tend to be pretty similar, regardless of the age. Younger children tend to be more open than older readers, and if they don't like something, they'll come straight out and tell you, rather than politely allude to it. But it's very rare that I'll get any harsh criticism, except of course when it comes to the end of a long series – it's hard to please everyone when they've invested so much time in a story, so I get some flak for my finales, the way I think any writer who works on this scale does. But again, the age of the reader doesn't really seem to have any impact on that.



JK: Why do you think that children in particular are drawn to horror and the unknown? As you've mentioned, one of your earliest memories was of watching *Dracula* –

DS: I think children are well suited to horror, because horror works best if you can suspend your sense of disbelief and truly believe in the world of the story. Children reading my books are sometimes only a few years out of their belief in Santa Claus and fairies. There are still many fantastical facets of the world that they either believe in or are more open to believing in. As adults, most of us know that vampires aren't and can't be truly real. Children don't see those logical divisions the same way we do. They're more open to the idea of the world's possibilities, and so fiction



resonates more strongly for them, as for them it's not that far removed from fact.

JK: Adults have been creating and telling horror stories since before a written tradition even existed – why do you think horror stories are so persistent, so widespread across time and cultures?

DS: I have a theory that the first stories ever told were horror stories. Early humans, sitting in a dark cave or a forest clearing, making up tales of what might be out there, lurking in the shadows, ready to strike. I think horror is central to our mental development as a species, to stoking the fires of our imaginations and taking us beyond the realms of the merely practical. Fear is key to survival in the evolutionary stakes — animals learn to be wary of certain noises, and run when they sense a threat. We've flourished as a species because we don't just react to known threats — we react to the unknown as well, to the threat of monsters, threat of disease, threat of extinction. Telling horror stories keeps us on our toes, and helps us make sense of the world and survive in what is, in truth, a horrific, hostile universe.



JK: Are *The Evil and the Pure* and *Sunburn* the first of many new stand-alone titles to come?

DS: Hopefully. I want to tell different types of horror stories. There will probably be some non-horror work in there too, but for the most part I want to experiment and write novels which are dark and disturbing, but in various ways. I don't want there to be a standard Darren Dash style. I'm hoping to surprise readers each time out. Of course, that means I might disappoint readers too, if they're looking for another *Evil* or *Sunburn*, but I'd rather run that risk than simply serve them up the same sort of story time after time.

JK: What does success mean for you at this stage of your career? How have your thoughts about it evolved over time?

DS: Since my late teens, my vision of success hasn't changed. Success to me is writing the very best stories that I can write, and producing as many of them as I can, while setting aside enough time for other enjoyable pursuits — no one should be a slave of their work, even if it's work they love. Financial success is a lovely bonus. I've been fortunate, and some of my books have sold in huge amounts and made me an awful lot of money, and yes, life is much nicer when you don't have to worry about the bills — but I've also written books which haven't sold so well, especially on the adult front, and they mean every bit as much to me as the chart-toppers. I continue to work on projects that intrigue me, for children and adults, and I devote as much time to each book as I feel the story merits. I never think about the charts or my readers or what publishers are looking for. If a story grabs me, I run with it, and try to produce the very best output that I can. At that point I look at where I can take it in the market, and try to find a publisher, or decide to self-publish. It's nice when I write a book that can sell in the hundreds of thousands of copies as opposed to just the hundreds, but the success, for me, has nothing to do with how well it sells, but in how good a job I've done in bringing my ideas to life.

JK: Thanks so much Darren!

Writer's Note: Darren Shan may be visited online at: <http://www.darrenshan.com/>

Notes on contributor:

Jeffery Klaehn holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Amsterdam (2007) and completed a second PhD, in Sociology, at the University of Strathclyde in 2012. More information about his work can be found at: <http://uva.academia.edu/JefferyKlaehn>.