

Derek Landy Interview – 29 March 2010, 10.00am

Tell me how you got into writing children's books:

By accident. I had written two films and thought I was firmly into horror movies. I thought I would write a book one day; a crime novel for adults.

Skulduggery popped into my head while I was in a dingy hotel. It came in an instant like an epiphany.

I knew straight away he was a book. I adore comics but I knew I had captured too much there to be captured in a movie or a graphic novel.



Why a female central character?

It wasn't a conscious decision like, I now need to populate my story with strong female characters sort of thing. I've grown up around strong woman; my mother and my sisters.

Stephanie is based on a real person I taught martial arts to when she was twelve – she's 22 now.

Do boys read your books too?

The covers, title and skeleton – are an excuse for boys to allow themselves to enjoy the book and the fact that the main character is a girl hasn't deterred them. As long as you have a story that they will respond to – they will read it.

Where did you get your names from?

I first came up with Skulduggery and then had a dilemma. Do I just have Skulduggery with a cool name and everyone else has normal names or does everyone have unusual names. In the end it was an excuse to have as weird, poetic, and pretentious names as I wanted to.

I tend to take note of unusual names. At home I keep a note book of names. While doing signings; I keep the post-it-note names of those that are different. It is entirely possible that if someone has an eye-catching name they'll find themselves in a book.

How do you structure your writing time?

Not that structured. I tend to become as anti-social as possible. I write at night until 3.00 – 4.00am and get up the next day at 11.00 – 12.00pm. I work in three stages:

1. Mostly dreaming of ideas, daydreaming and thinking 'wouldn't it be cool if...' keeping thoughts going of scenes that grab attention.
2. Taking writing more seriously; writing every day. Put in a lot of hours but still make time to see family (mother and sisters) and friends.

3. At the third stage, I'm right in the middle of it and it becomes an obsession. As soon as I wake up – I'm in it. I do take breaks, see the family and walk the dog but get right back into it.

It is three stages of absolutely fun.

How did the book get accepted?

I struggled earlier on. I was kicked out of Art College and mucked around for a while. At 21 years I decided to take something seriously. For seven years I taught myself how to write scripts. After the second film I got an agent. So the struggle was there.

When I wrote Skulduggery – it took six months to write – I gave it to my agent and she spent some time helping me to edit it down. Then she sent it off and within three weeks began to get interesting phone calls. A week later Harper Collins made a big offer. So it sounds like I got accepted straight away but there was that initial learning and struggling period.

Do you have another series in the pipeline?

I want to. Skulduggery is a nine book series so that is going to take up a chunk of my life. But I've orchestrated my time so that I have six months free. I don't have to start writing the next Skulduggery until the end of the year. I won't delay Skulduggery but I won't have the pressure of that on my mind while I'm trying to come up with a new idea. I don't want to finish the series then have the pressure of starting something new and coming up with something just as good – I want to create something now while I am in the midst of the skulduggery series.

Script writing has enabled you to write really visual scenes; tell me about that.

Yes, the script writing has enabled me to not tell what a character is thinking or doing – I tend to show it with all the dialogue and action. It respects the audience when you approach it that way. You don't need an inner monologue of your thoughts. It is visual, it is dialogue. Because Skulduggery is a detective story I've been able to indulge in that 1940's type detective repartee (rapid fire dialogue where everyone is smart and funny) and I'm introducing that style to a younger audience.

Any tips for writers of children's lit?

Have fun; especially while you're writing. Before I wrote Skulduggery I had tried to write a couple of novels but I got bored with them and never finished them. With Skulduggery I basically concentrate on making every chapter my favourite; I pack it full of action and funny dialogue. When I finish it I think it is absolutely my favourite then I go onto the next chapter. Fun is contagious; readers pick up on it. Also don't look at what is on the market, and top of the charts and don't anticipate what will be cool next – do what you find fun. I love martial arts and detective movies – and they're in my book. Odds on you'll find a reader that will have those as their favourites too. Do what you want and have fun doing it. We aren't all so unique that someone else won't love it too.

How do you bring a balance to writing and being on tours?

It is like a conspiracy against me. Whenever I'm in the middle of a book – I have to go off on a tour. Just before this tour I had practically finished number five in the series. I can't write while I'm on

tour. I need the quiet and space at home. But on tour you get to meet all of these interesting people – and it fires me up. From a writer’s point of view I didn’t get into it to go on tours – I got into it to write. These days you’re expected to be a performer; you have to talk to hundreds of people and entertain them – do a stand-up show, which is weird. Writers write because they like spending a lot of time on their own and then suddenly boom, you’re thrust into an arena of 100s of people and you have to smile and entertain them.

When I first started – well, you know I have a stammer, I had to get used to speaking live, on television and on radio – but I’m kinda okay with it. I know some who aren’t. A friend of mine is terrified of public speaking. She looks all calm but inside she’s not.

You don’t expect this side of it but it is all part of the deal now. You sign the contract and they send you away weeks at a time.

Visit Derek Landy’s website: www.skulduggerypleasant.com

