



Author Spotlight

Jamie Thomson chats to Graham Marks

Jamie Thomson is an award-winning children's book author, as well as a writer and developer of a range of successful adventure game books and computer games. Here he talks to Graham Marks, often in his own voice*, about a life spent surrounded by goblins, evil villains and, of course, Dark Lords...

*[*When Jamie is talking, if you see something in italics, and it's not a book title, it means he has gone into full 'Dark Lord' mode]*

Some background before we begin...what were you doing, in the pre-Dirk world?

Well, I started off life in the 80s doing game books - the choose-your-own-adventure type - for Puffin in the Fighting Fantasy series. The first book I ever did, with a writing partner, was called Talisman of Death. Those did rather well, so I went off and did a load of them, then I did a two-player series and it had the only book I ever dedicated to my mother - 'To my darling Mother' - and it was called The Arena of Death.

I must've done about twenty five game books, and then that whole market dried up when computer games came along. So I got back into computer games and had a computer game company which went horribly wrong in the end and we lost a lot of money. After that I got back into novels, really.

Are there any games we might remember from that computer game company?

There was something called Warrior Kings, which was like an RTS [Real Time Strategy], in early 2000, a sort of fantasy thing. So essentially, it's been thirty years of selling goblins to kids and just doing fantasy left, right and centre, creating endless Dark Lords and big, bad villains, shooting them down or killing them. I've lived in that world for so long you begin to think 'surely Dark Lords have mothers...', and that starts getting you into why someone would become a Dark Lord.

Do you remember where you were when you had the idea for Dark Lord?

Yes, I was with a friend of mine, Dave Morris. We've since started another company and we have an American investor. He's quite a serious biotech venture capitalist, but he also used to love all of our game books; for him it's a bit of fun and he can meet up and talk to us. It's great for us because we're just free to write whatever we like - it's like having a patron, like a medieval Medici, except he's called Big Wedge Frank. So that's wonderful, and actually we're doing quite well at the moment.

So [back to your question], it was just me and Dave, having a few beers and riffing off about how great it would be if you had a Dark Lord wandering around Earth. It began with an idea about a Diary of a Dark Lord, so it would be like Darth Vader or Sauron actually writing 'Had to destroy a goblin today', or you can imagine 'Today the Hobbits found my ring - Noooo!', that kind of stuff. And then you start thinking about how could you really do the biography of a Dark Lord? You'd need to make him sympathetic or likeable, and you couldn't really do that if you were doing it straight - then it would be like trying to make Hitler or Stalin likeable. It had to be jokey. And then the comedy angle led to the fish-out-water stuff, and then having him cursed is a natural progression, cursed into the body of a thirteen year old boy and sent to school is just perfect.

Ultimate doom!

Yes, yes... 'School? Nooo!', which is one half of the joke and the other half is essentially: 'Dark...', 'Dirk?', 'No Dark!'. And that's pretty much the whole thing and it sort of took off and once you start thinking like that everything falls into place. You know he's going to meet some friends at school, there's going to be a headmaster, there's the hang-over from where he comes from and you don't know if he's mad or it's all true. So having the initial idea made it much easier to create everything.

And did you know straight away that you'd just had a really good idea?

Yes, right from telling it from the point of view of a Dark Lord at school.

Did you then go on to write the idea with Dave?

The way we usually do it is we sit around, and quite often have a few drinks. But that doesn't always work. You think it's a great idea, and you wake up the next morning and the notes say 'Aldebarran 5...Swamp Beast' – what? What were we saying?

The way we tend to work is that we'll have some ideas, and work up a few pages together. Then one of us will go away and do most of the writing and we'll occasionally meet up for some brainstorming to solve plot problems. And that can be great because you know you have writing partner to bounce ideas off, [someone] who also really knows the basic fundamental plot. You can say 'I've got stuck on this', because you can't see the wood for the trees, but your writing partner is far enough away that he can and you then talk everything through.

So we had the idea and I went away and wrote most of it.

How hard was it to convince other people that Dirk's tale was one worthy of telling?

I think one of the advantages of the idea was that we could say 'It's Sauron in Surbiton, as a school kid', and that sums it up. It always helps to be able to describe something in a single line. The basic premise is interesting, but part of it was also Lord of the Rings films and Harry Potter - it's like that film Galaxy Quest, which never could have been made without twenty years of Star Trek. And so Dark Lord couldn't have been done in the 70s or 80s, but now everyone knows what a Dark Lord is. Even the Germans and the Italians and the Spanish, they all still use the English 'Dark Lord' [on the cover]; because of Harry Potter they don't need to translate it. It made it very timely to come out now because everyone gets it.

So there were no spells and/or nefariousness involved?

Ah well...Of course the Dark Lord blackmailed many an editor with his evil machinations...

Dirk is a very well-drawn, very rounded (in an angular way) character – is he actually based on anyone you've ever met?

[Laughs] I've also done a lot of Dungeons and Dragons role playing games, and most of the time you play Heroes and Paladins, but sometimes you end up playing evil guys, just for the fun of it. So really Dirk is sort of me or Dave in some of our gaming personas. He became so real to me, he's still real to me now, sitting on my shoulder, cattle-prodding me and making me work...like I'm his minion, and he's telling me what to do. He came out of all that gaming and he happened really naturally, and that's why it's so good, I think. I know exactly what the evil super villain will say in any computer or board game, and the challenge was to make Dirk likeable and redemptive.

In a way that's down to Christopher and Sooz and Sal...

It's really a story of classic socialising through friendship, because he's never had friends before.

Is it at all like your own school days?

Inevitably a school will be like your own, to a degree, but everything is exaggerated; you just take a normal situation, exaggerate it and then stick Dirk into it. That almost makes it happen on its own. And then there are the relationships and tensions between the characters.

This is a very detailed world you've created – how long did it take to do that, and is there loads more that you know about but haven't been able to put in the book?

There is a lot that's been left out, but nothing's wasted; I'm doing Dark Lord 3 now and you never know

when stuff will come in. But my career has mostly been about creating worlds, so that was the easy bit... you need the nations, but you leave religion out of it as it's too sensitive these days. Already in the American version we've had to take out the word 'Hell', so instead of 'By the nine Hells!' Dirk has to say 'By the nine nether worlds!', and there's other stuff like that.

But normally, if you're doing a computer game or role playing game, you'd have a very detailed pantheon of different gods for different cultures, different politics and battle and combat tactics, like you're creating an entire medieval nation from scratch, with stuff from mythology, science fiction and Japanese themes. I've done so much of that it would be easy to parody, but this is a more of a comedy parody and at the same time a great example of the genre and a loving homage.

Did you instruct the designers and artists involved in making the pictures, map and Great Seal Of Dirk?

The Great Seal of Dirk! Well that actually comes from a series of ours called The Fabled Lands and was originally done by the artist we got for those books. It was the mask of the Faceless King of...I can't remember the name of the strange land now...but it was such a great seal that it worked perfectly for Dirk. That was pre-generated, and I'd done sketches for the maps. But there was this old friend of mine called Leo Hartas, who's been an illustrator for many years, and we knew his daughter, Freya; one day Leo got in touch with us and said that Freya, who was now 18, had a blog.

I had a look and it was full of art that she'd done, which was like in the style of her Dad, but much weirder and from another place. And I thought 'This is perfect, this is great for Dark Lord!' and sent her the book. She never bothered to read it, being 18, until her father finally forced her to and she loved it. She sent some pix in, which were great and we sent them to the publishers, and they loved them, too, and she got the job. She was sort of guided, but the great thing about Freya is that she adds lots of little freaky details, which were so Dirk-like they're wonderful, and then I put in the captions.

Do you have an actual Great Seal Of Dirk?

No, but that's a good idea...we could get a rubber stamp made!

Reading the book is almost like being in the mind of a proper mad person, for whom other people's reality is incomprehensible; how did you do that?

It was definitely part of me, I'm afraid! I think I started life a bit bemused by the world, so I think I drew on that a bit...it's a product of all that gaming, coupled with my own bemusement. Although, saying that, I was born in Iran and lived there for the first ten years of my life, and then went to boarding school in England; my dad worked for Shell and we lived on an oil field. So, in a way, that also makes you look at the world from a different perspective.

It gives you a very good understanding of the outsider principle.

I think that's true. You're born a little bit of an outsider, in a small, unique group of people, then you come to Britain still a bit of an outsider.

No Man's Land is basically home.

Yes, or the alternative is...I fell to your planet many years ago, from the Dark Lands – I pretend it is fiction, but it's all true!

The scene where Dirk is with Wings and Randle and seems to be losing a grip on his reality took me completely by surprise – was that always planned or were you surprised to find yourself writing it?

The actual scene, I knew was going to be like that, but the idea that Dirk would completely lose faith wasn't there in any of my notes...I had about 10,000 words of notes before I started writing.

There were moments when I was reminded, partly because of the drawings, of Ronald Searle and the worlds of Molesworth and St Trinians – were you a fan?

I think it's more Just William, because it's like an evil Just William.

The book – and this might sound strange – seems to me to be very audible, in that I can hear the characters, particularly Dirk, who has such a positive voice; do you declaim as you write?

I do sometimes, yes. I often go, after I've written it, Mwah-ha-ha-ha!. I do it at the school visits, and get the kids to do it, too – My name is Johnny, but you can call me Master!, said with disdainful arrogance. Friends

who've read [the book] tell me they can actually hear me saying what Dirk's saying. Not sure if that ruins it for them or not. And not sure if I can actually do anything else, other than talk like a Dark Lord!

Did you know before the presentation that you'd won the Roald Dahl Funny Prize?

No, I was completely convinced I wasn't going to win. I was up against David Walliams, Frank Cottrell Boyce, who'd just come off doing the Olympics, Phillip Reeve, Josh Lacey and Mark Lowery. And then one of the judges, Mel Giedroyc, was talking, saying how she was on the Tube, laughing out loud at a book and someone came up to her and said 'Are you all right?'. I went into full Dark Lord mode in my mind – Curse that Walliams! May he suffer the Curse of the Withered Plums for making her laugh on the Tube! And then it actually turned out it was me!

Do you enjoy going out and doing visits in the real world?

I was terrified at first, I'd never done it before, and I was going to have to go out and essentially perform in front of an audience of kids. I'd rather have had twenty drunken rugby players, I can handle the abuse! It was terrifying because they can smell fear!

They can!

But as soon as I got the hook to the story, and got them talking like Dark Lords, I'd won the majority of them over.

Do you know where you're going next?

Not really. We sort of had this idea to do stuff, and it seemed like a good idea to write, but I never realised it would be so successful and create this writing career for me. It was more like, I've got some bills coming in and what can you do when you get to a certain age? We were so evolved as specialists, in game books, like pandas and bamboo...if there's no bamboo, they die. As I still wanted to be a panda I had to learn to do something else.