



Author Spotlight

Taran Matharu chats to Graham Marks

Taran Matharu is a debut author whose road to getting published is a story in itself. Here he tells Graham Marks how his new trilogy, *Summoner: The Novice*, went from a daily online post about the world of Hominum to an international hit.

How did this story begin?

I was studying at the University of Bath and I heard that someone from Penguin was coming in to speak to business students...I went, and one of their directors gave us a wonderful speech. I spoke to him after the lecture and I happened to mention that I was interested in writing and becoming writer. This was not for *Summoner*, this was for another book that I'd been playing around with at the time. He told me that I should put it on Wattpad, [which] he had also mentioned in the presentation, talking about how it was changing the way publishers were finding books and changing the way publishers were marketing books. I'd heard of Wattpad but I hadn't really looked into it at that point because I was too focused on getting a job.

Can you explain what Wattpad is?

It's effectively somewhere [online] where you can share books that you're writing with people from around the world, a chapter at a time...you tend to serialize it. Some people put the whole thing up at once, but, the way that the algorithms work, it's better to build a following over time rather than just put it all out there for [people] to read in a day and then forget about you. Readers can comment, there are forums where people can talk, and they can vote on your book. They can even comment...so it's a great place for feedback and for people to follow your writing.

What happened next?

I applied to Penguin Random House for an internship; there were 5,000 applicants for four roles and I managed to get one of them, which was really exciting. Throughout my time there, whenever I mentioned that I had book to someone relevant they'd say, "Well, you know, if you haven't tried [getting an] agent, why don't you try Wattpad. It's a new way of getting published."

My internship finished there and because I had heard so much about Wattpad, I decided to start writing. I had a month before I was going to go traveling in Australia, and this also happened to be National Novel Writing Month and I thought, "Well, I'll just write a chapter a day and I'll put it up on online and hopefully people commenting will get me inspired enough to keep going and I'll have a finished book by the end of it."

When was this?

2013...at that point, I think after about the fifth chapter, I had about 400 reads, which to me was amazing, the fact that people were reading it at all. There was this one guy called Achilles, that's what his online name was, who would comment on every single chapter and he'd give me a mini-review. Initially, I was solely writing for this one person to see what his feedback was. His English wasn't great because he was from

Indonesia, I think, [but] it was just amazing to have someone telling you that they were enjoying your work. By about the fifteenth day I had something like 40,000 reads.

There were a lot of people commenting, [which] wasn't massively unusual on Wattpad - there are plenty of books with millions of reads on there - but I did get excited. I thought, "Well, this means it's good enough. It doesn't necessarily mean it's going to change everything but it's definitely doing well." By the end of the month, I had hit a 100,000 reads and I was about to go traveling so I told the readers, "Look, I'm going to upload a chapter a week now", because previously I was uploading a chapter a day. Some people were disappointed but they accepted it.

I went traveling in Australia for about a month, maybe a month and a half, and wrote one chapter a week. I hit half a million reads after about two months, and I hit a million after four months; [then] I started uploading a chapter every two weeks as I was job hunting and doing other things. Once I hit a million reads, someone from NBC News got in touch and said, "Hey, we're looking to do a story on serialized fiction, can we interview you?" We had a very quick interview, it probably lasted about 15 minutes, and they used some of the concept art I'd had an artist do and was sharing with my fans.

The day after, an audio book publisher got in touch and offered to buy the audio book rights for my book. That was very exciting because I suddenly realized that my book was publishable and people were taking it seriously, but I also knew from my experience in the publishing industry that if you give away rights, certain publishers won't consider your book because they always like to get [all the] rights.

I didn't know what to do [so] I contacted three agents on Facebook, all of whom were in the US. I just asked them for advice and they all got back to me saying that they don't usually respond, but definitely don't sell audio book rights and also, could they read the manuscript? I sent my manuscript and was offered representation the next morning. At that point, I was very wary of what to do. My ex-boss happened to contact me, asking me how I was doing and how I was getting on with the job hunt and everything; I mentioned my situation to him and he advised me on three of the best agents for children's fantasy in the UK. I began applying and received offers from all three, and then another three offers from US agents. In the end, I signed with my current UK agency.

Was selling the book nerve-wracking as an experience?

Yes! [Early on we had] a preemptive offer for a lot of money, which [my agent] turned down. The book went to auction in the UK, the US [and] Germany. The US was very stressful because there were [a couple of] very high offers, so I had to decide between them, which was difficult. That's kind of what happened...it's sold in eleven territories now, so it's all over the place, and more are coming through every other week. There was a Bulgarian deal just last week, and France wasn't too long before that. Things are still happening, there's still exciting phone calls or emails coming in every now and again.

How have your online fans reacted to what happened?

Fortunately I had been very clear with my [online] fan base that I was trying to get a publishing deal from the start. It was in the introduction to the book saying, "Hi, I'm trying to get this book published so I'd appreciate your support". They knew that there was a possibility of that and I updated them. They were on my side completely. There can be some backlash, but I can safely say for me there was barely anything, one or two disgruntled comments [but] other than that it was immensely positive. I was expecting people to be upset with me but they weren't.

I decided that as a 'thank you' to the readers [I would] write a prequel for free for them; [it's] going up every two weeks at the moment, which is a bit of a distraction from writing the sequel, which I'm trying to do now. It's my way of thanking them for all their support, for commenting and inspiring me, for voting and telling their friends about it.

Was being a writer what you always wanted to do?

Yes, yes it was actually. In fact, to be honest, the only reason why I never went [straight] into writing is because my family are very business orientated. My dad is a businessman, my uncle is a businessman...I think for them writing was never really considered as a career. I guess for some parents it's like when their kids say they want to be an actor, they don't take it seriously.

They worry, don't they?

Yes. They want to guide you towards the safe option. But I am quite business-minded as well, [and] I find the publishing industry fascinating, which is why I went into it. And being business-minded is, perhaps, a big part of why the book has been successful as well; because I did hire a concept artist, I did look at my [online] statistics to work out when was the best day to upload [a chapter], to see what was working, and what wasn't - do people like this, do people like that? I did come at it from a business perspective, I think, and that helped me.

Growing up, were you always a reader of fantasy?

Yes! I was very, very shy, [as a kid]...I went to private schools where I was one of the only Asian kids and I used to be bullied quite badly, so I used to do a lot of reading - this was back when I was ten or eleven. I loved Brian Jacques, for example, and I just devoured all [his books]. Then I read our entire school library over the course of about two years. It's funny, because the school actually asked my parents to stop buying me so many books because I was reading too much. They thought it was impacting on my social life.

My love for writing definitely stems from a love of reading. It also stems a little bit from the fact that I never met many characters that I felt [were like me]...I love fantasy, but I guess it was mostly Caucasian characters in the books. I always wanted to write myself into these stories because I couldn't project myself into them. Every book that I wrote as a child, the character was either called Taran or Narat, which is my name backwards. They'd look like me and they'd have my background.

That's where my writing came from initially, and since then I dabbled...while at college and at uni. It was only very recently that I took it seriously and I realized that, [working at a] publishing house, I'd encountered other authors who have been successful and who were able to pay the bills whilst also doing something that they absolutely loved. I felt like I had to have a go.

Where did the idea for *Summoner* come from?

There are so many different aspects [and] there are so many places that it came from. For example one was history, my love of history; I love historical novels, [like those by] Bernard Cornwell and Wilbur Smith, and I loved history at school, especially the Napoleonic Wars, the East India Company and all the piracy that happened around that time. The age that the books take place in [is based on] those parts of history; so, muskets and flintlock pistols, sabers and things like that, they all came from my love of history. I also loved how the world was changed so quickly by the Industrial Revolution, and the series takes place right when flintlock and musket technology has been discovered and is completely changing how warfare works.

Then there's my personal experience of racism as a kid, and the way that you can be treated differently for being of a different race. Like the dwarves are treated in the book, and the way the elves and the humans don't necessarily like each other very much, [that's] partly about racial tensions and how you can look past the differences in someone and actually see that you're all the same deep down...how racial tensions can spiral into political situations, so that's certainly a part of it as well.

Then there's myths and legends...all the demons are based on the myths and legends that I love; so there are salamanders and griffins, and lots of different types of demons that come from Greek mythology. The other thing is popular culture. I wanted to write a book that took into account not just tropes, but the things that I knew I loved about fantasy.

Why do you think you like fantasy so much?

I love the idea of magical schools from Ursula Le Guin's books and obviously *Harry Potter* is a big one. The idea of having multiple races and an epic universe, that was from *Lord of the Rings* and various other books, and having creatures that can fight for you, kind of like *Pokémon* and so many video games where there's a character that can summon creatures. Video games certainly are a big part of the way I wrote the story as well...I like the idea of starting with nothing and having to build yourself up, as so often you have to do in video games. I guess I wrote the book that I'd always wanted to read.

There are so many elements of fantasy but they're so disparate, they're spread out across so many different books and so many different genres and I couldn't find a book that had all of them. I kind of combined them all and made it into a story. The characters really resonated with me, I had to write the book. There was no way that I wasn't going to write it.

How soon after you started writing did you realize you were onto something?

I think I knew I had something, in terms of my writing and the style of writing, relatively early on when people started to really pick up on the [story]. It was only when the main character, Fletcher, gets to the military academy, where he learns to start summoning, that it really took off. That's when I knew that people loved the themes in this book. So many people have told me that this book has everything in it...I combined all the elements that I loved into one cohesive story.

When did you know that it was going to be more than one book?

Actually, I've always envisioned it that way...I guess my writing process is quite fluid because I was writing it so quickly, a chapter a day. I always had these rough signposts in place for what needed to happen in the book, and as I wrote different sub-plots appeared and I started to realize that this isn't one book. I think I knew, probably about halfway through Book One, that this had got to be at least a trilogy. It actually works very well because there are three key parts to Fletcher's life as he grows as a character and he becomes the person he needs to be to save the empire.

Did you work out all of the mythology, the history and the geography of Hominum before you began to write, or did that happen as you were writing?

I think it was half and half. I definitely had the summary, the kind of broad brush strokes of this world pegged pretty early on. As you write, these nuances come in, which make it richer, and then you realize [one thing] has a big impact on another part of the story...the history was certainly in place, but the detail was filled in as I wrote it. I think it works quite well in that way because you don't contradict yourself, but by having the broad strokes in place you leave the story open enough to be able to add twists and subplots.

I wondered, as I was reading it, whether the book is based on somewhere that you have imagined or somewhere you've actually been.

I'd say that Hominum itself is a mix between Norway, where I studied for six months, and the English countryside, which I adore - and certainly the English countryside in the winter, perhaps more than the English countryside in the summer. Then the jungles themselves, which you don't see until Book Two, are based upon the jungles in Australia that I saw on my trip there, and on the Amazon, where I lived for about three or four weeks as part of a very cool holiday I had there. I haven't really explored where the elves are yet, [but it's] inspired by the huge Redwoods in US.

You also have a very large cast of characters. Were they easy to control, or did any of them give you any more trouble than others?

It's certainly difficult to make sure that every character has their own voice, and I think all the main characters have their own unique personalities. I think the easiest character for me was Fletcher himself, because so many different things happen to him, he always tries to do the right thing. Sometimes I did wonder whether doing the right thing was the same as doing the smart thing, and I battled [with myself] about what Fletcher would do. I do find it frustrating when a character does something that just seems so stupid. I wouldn't say I struggled with this, but it certainly gave me pause for thought every now and again.

I imagined, as I was reading the book, that, because the high born characters are not as likable, they might be harder to write - did that happen?

I'd say that there are a few high born characters who are unlikable and a few who are just who they are. I based some of the characters on the experiences I had when I was younger...and I think that was to make sure that they weren't one-dimensionally dislikable. Giving some of the sub-characters their own unique personality was tough...yeah, I'd say, perhaps with the minor characters, just making sure that you get who they are whilst also not involving them too much in the story was slightly harder.

Do you ever see somebody, an actor, or somebody on the street, and know that they'd be perfect for one of your characters?

Yes, actually. Wattpad has a casting feature that allows you to choose actors who you would like to play your characters. That's a very good way for readers to visualize these people. I've had a go, [but] I wouldn't say that they're the perfect match. You don't necessarily have that person's exact face in your head, as the writer, but you know them when you see them. In fact I can tell you who struck me as looking quite similar to [certain] characters. For example, for Fletcher it was Evan Peters [*American Horror Story*, *Kick-Ass*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*] but with black hair...he's a bit too old now, so perhaps Evan Peters five or six years ago. Saoirse Ronan [*The Lovely Bones*, *How I Live Now*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*] is pretty close to how I imagine Sylva to look and Tyler Posey [*Teen Wolf*, *Scary Movie 5*] might do quite well as Seraph... then Mark Strong [*The Green Lantern*, *The Imitation Game*, *Kingsmen: The Secret Service*] definitely is very similar to how I imagine Rook to be.

What kind of writer are you? I'm assuming from the way you've been talking that you have to be a bit of a planner, and not somebody who just dives in and see where the story is going to take them.

I think for Book One, I was not a planner; I was a pantsler for the first half of the book.

A what?

A pantsler, flying by the seat of my pants.

There are 'planners' and 'pantsers', those are the terms I hear being used. I was flying by the seat of my pants because I had to write a chapter a day and that took me about two hours a night. It wasn't rushed, but I certainly was aware that a chapter needed to go up that day. I think it's a great way of writing, actually, and I don't think the story would have turned out like it did if I hadn't been writing in that way for such a compacted time period, rather than writing it over three years where you dip in and out.

I definitely flew by the seat of my pants for the first half of the book. I did have the world in mind but not what the events were that happened. They were definitely pantsed. The second half of the book was planned, mostly because I realized [that] I needed to start bringing it to a close. Not so much that it was too long, more that there was a side plot which actually belonged much better in Book Two, and is in Book Two.

Knowing that Book Two needed to be finished by May, meant it was more planned; I wouldn't say I have a chapter-by-chapter synopsis, but I know roughly what's going to happen.

Your Skype profile picture shows you playing guitar. Does music play a part in your writing?

I dabble, but I wouldn't say I'm much of a guitar player. I pretty much always picture the scenes that I'm going to write, or might be writing in my head, while I listen to music. If it's melancholic, then perhaps that scene takes a more melancholic tone. There's a piano player, Ludovico Einaudi, who is brilliant and he writes very melancholic songs, piano pieces, and they're wonderful and they definitely help me get the scene in my head right. I'd say music helps me in the development process but not in the writing process.

I try not to listen to music when I'm writing. I don't like listening to music when I'm writing because it's so hard - when someone else is speaking in your ear, or [there's music], it's so difficult to form sentences. I actually have these noise-cancelling headphones that I put on so I'm in absolute silence when I write.