

## Finding Yourself in Books as a Teenager

**Note from the editors:** Those lucky enough to be able to attend the 2010 ALAN Conference were able to listen to the droll, witty, macabre, yet surprisingly optimistic author Shan deliver this address. For those of you unable to join us, here it is.

I had great pleasure in speaking at the NCTE/ALAN conference in Orlando in November, although I had to chuckle when informed of the subject of my speech. The last time I had spoken to an adult audience in the USA had been at an event in Reno a few years earlier, where I had spotted lots of teachers and librarians finding themselves. Finding themselves at slot machines, finding themselves at roulette wheels, finding themselves at . . .

Pretty much all of my novels for teenagers deal with the issue of teens finding themselves. I think that's what our teenage years are all about, discovering and defining who we are. They're years of self-exploration, and my books deal with that, through the medium of horror and fantasy. I think horror and fantasy lend themselves very well to this. They're a way for teenagers to look at themselves indirectly, to have fun while they are busy finding out who they are.

A phrase I hate more than any other is, "Books are good for you." I think that's the kiss of death for a children's book! Of course reading IS educational—but we need to keep that a secret. No self-respecting teenager wants to do what is good for them! We have to slip our messages in behind a screen of entertainment. And what can be more entertaining for your average, bloodthirsty teenager than stories about demons, vampires, and cannibals?!?

My novel, *The Thin Executioner*, deals head-on through the medium of fantasy with the theme of a

teenager finding himself in this conflicted, confusing twenty-first century world which we inhabit. On the one hand, it's a fantastical, action-packed quest novel about a particularly unpleasant boy who wants to chop off heads for a living. On the other, it's a story of redemption and hope, of making connections with our fellow human beings and learning from them, about how each one of us has the ability to change if we can force ourselves to look inwards and ask questions, and not simply accept as truth all of the things which we are told by our elders.

Jebel Rum, the central character in *The Thin Executioner*, has been brought up to believe that might makes right, that slavery is acceptable, that execution is a fit punishment for any and all crimes. He's a nasty, self-centered, arrogant, merciless piece of work—but, as the novel makes clear, that's because he is the product of a nasty, self-centered, arrogant, merciless society.

In the novel, Jebel sets off on a quest to gain magical powers which will allow him to become an executioner when he grows up. Along the way, he comes into contact with all sorts of people who see the world differently. At first, he dismisses them out of hand. He views them as heretics, savages, lesser creatures. He doesn't respect their views, their beliefs, their right to live their lives as they see fit. He judges everyone by his own people's standards, and if they fall short, he treats them with scorn and contempt.

But as the novel progresses, he starts to change. He begins to question what he has been taught. He examines the values on which he has been raised. He dares to think critically of those who have tried to shape him into a mirror image of themselves.

Jebel is a reluctant rebel. He doesn't hold himself

to be morally superior in any way, shape, or form. He simply can't stand by and meekly accept doctrines that he no longer can believe in. He loses his faith in what he has been reared to hold as true—and in doing so, he discovers his humanity and emerges as a fully-formed, self-determining individual.

What I love most about teenagers is that they all possess this ability to change. They're not the finished article. They can learn from our mistakes and become better people than we are—at least in theory! They're in the process of becoming, and I think teen literature should reflect and encourage this.

I hope that when teenagers read *The Thin Executioner*, they identify with Jebel Rum, that they see echoes of their own flaws and prejudices in him. While they're enjoying their action-packed adventures with Jebel, I want them to take a closer look at their own beliefs and standards. And if they see the need for change, I wish with all my heart that Jebel's experiences can help them find the strength and determination within themselves to start working on those changes.

I also think teenage books can serve as a call to arms, that they can encourage teens to find themselves through self-expression. A good book can fire them up, get them excited, and motivate them into trying to grab life by the throat and shake up the universe. I have an example of this in a letter that a girl called Darci wrote to me a few months back. *The Thin Executioner* is a political book, an allegory about the times in which we live. As well as trying to help teenagers to look at themselves, I was also asking them to look piercingly at the world around them. Darci took my subtle urgings to heart and was stung into both thought and action by the book. I find her enthusiasm to share what she has learned contagious and exciting. If this was the only bit of positive feedback I had ever received about the book (luckily, it isn't!), even by itself it would have made every day that I worked on the novel a worthwhile, rewarding experience.

Dear Mr. Shan,

I had been expecting the usual Shan experience from your latest book—dry, ironic, macabre, somewhat cute in a ghoulish way. I figured there would be a “deep” hidden message somewhere between the pages—there always is a message if you look hard enough—but I was not quite expecting what I found between the covers of *The Thin Executioner*.

*Mr Shan, I am being absolutely honest and blunt when I say that this book needs to go down as required reading in the States for the next few generations. I have searched but have not found a book that deals so eloquently with the mistakes of the west other than your book. On the surface, the story is engaging and fascinating, without much bloodshed, pretty universal, and ageless. But it was with further inspection that it became apparent just how fantastic the novel is and how important it really could be to my country.*

*The concept of religious and racial tolerance, the clear reworking of the west/east battle into this truly beautiful work of art makes it stand out so fantastically. While reading it, I remember my jaw dropping once I realized that this wasn't a book I could read recreationally. This was a book that I had to absorb into me, a book that would have a clear, resounding moral message that was going to carry much weight. There are so many layers to the novel that I am excited to go back and reread it and see just how many more I can reach.*

*Mr Shan, I have to thank you for writing this. I think that it may be one of the single most important pieces of literature to come out of this whole mess of a war. The book came into my life at a sort of ironic time—our collective summer reading book for my high school was a novel about a bunch of American soldiers going to Iraq during the first wave of attacks in 2002. The book, while having good intentions, missed its mark pretty clearly. Although it could have been a wonderful piece of commentary and it could have really opened minds and changed hearts, it failed. I had been really disappointed in it and wondered why on earth the school was having us read it.*

*Then, of course, I found *The Thin Executioner*, and could only sit in awe as I devoured it. Where that other book failed, your book succeeded, passing every test with blinding accuracy.*

*I want you to know that I am going to fight to get this book on our summer reading list next year. I am going to argue with every teacher I have to in order to at least get it considered—because I think it is a clear choice. It's simple enough for all the kids in the school to get something out of it, but deep enough that with gentle pushing and prodding by teachers, I think the kids could really get the message out of it.*

*I have never been so proud to call myself a Darren Shan fan.*

*Darci*

And I am very proud to have Darci as a fan. In fact, I'm rather relieved that I have her on my side; with that sort of drive, commitment, and passion, I think she could be a truly formidable enemy!

While I hope that my novels help teenagers learn a bit more about who they are, and help them find ways to express that, I'm all too aware that when it comes to teen literature, no writer exists in a vacuum. We're all in this together—readers, writers, teachers, librarians, parents, etc. As Darci pointed out, teachers and librarians who use books as inspirational tools are just as important in helping teenagers find themselves in books as writers are. They can direct children toward books that will help them grow and develop. They can help children get the most out of those books, to zone in on messages they might otherwise miss. They can start discussions and debates and encourage their students to think, question, and explore.

Obviously a teacher or librarian's job is easy if they're dealing with uplifting, respectable books and authors. But what happens when their kids are drawn to a degenerate rogue like *me*?! Well, I wrote a piece about this some years ago, focusing on teenagers who, perhaps inspired by my books, were writing gross-out horror stories. I think it links in neatly with the argument I've been making thus far, so here it is.<sup>1</sup>

*In school, I once wrote a bloodthirsty story for a student teacher, thinking, "She'll be young and hip enough to dig it." She wasn't, and I almost got expelled.*

*I've had more than a few letters over the years from children and parents complaining about teachers who don't understand them, who criticise them if they choose to write horror stories, who demand blood-free, family-friendly tales. In my books, I've buried a child alive . . . killed off dozens of characters . . . cannibals have cavorted merrily . . . in one, a boy witnessed a demon using his split-in-two sister as a hand-puppet. Nice!*

*Oddly, I don't get many complaints about my books, because as bloody as they are, most adults note the moral resonances. I write about kids who take responsibility, who put their lives on the line for family and friends, who learn the meaning of duty, courage, self-reliance. Horror is the web I weave to capture the attention of my teen readers. But they learn about much more than the workings of vampires and demons. Yes, I like bloody, action-packed fight scenes,*

*but I'm more interested in exploring emotions and the problems my characters face, using fantasy to mirror and probe the more complex real world.*

*But as a teenager, I wasn't concerned with using horror and fantasy to take my readers on a voyage of self-discovery. I wasn't able to. Writers develop over time, with age and experience. At thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, I knew I wanted to be a writer. That's when I began working hard, writing lots of short stories in my spare time, making my first stab at novels. I yearned to make an impression, create a story that readers would respond to, that would excite and thrill.*

*Lacking the ability to craft such stories, I went for full-on gore and violence instead. I travelled down many vile, vicious paths with my imagination, coming up with the sorts of stories that never see the light of day, being far better suited to as dark a setting as possible! But I learned to write good stories by churning out these crimson shams. Where writing is concerned, practise makes perfect. The advice I give young, would-be writers—the only advice I think they ever really need—is, "The more you write, the better you get."*

*Naturally, having been stung by showing one of my more colourful stories to an outraged teacher, I kept these stories to myself. I withdrew into my own secret world. I couldn't let anyone into it because I feared the repercussions. My late teens were a negative time, because I was exploring a dark landscape and had undertaken the task by myself, with no one to guide or encourage me.*

*If I'd had a teacher I felt free to show my work to, and discuss it with, maybe I'd have come through the darkness earlier and easier than I did. I needed someone to tell me less is more, that I didn't have to go into disgusting details to impress. Someone who wouldn't criticise me for going off in the directions I took, but who could explain why they weren't worth taking and lead me back to the road I eventually, luckily found by myself.*

*I think many teenagers have a terrible sense of feeling alone, especially if they're of a creative bent and that creativity leads them to places that are frowned upon by the adults they interact with. Yes, it's fun to be a rebel—but it can be scary, isolating, and depressing, too. We don't live in an ideal world. I know teaching's a hard job, that it's easier to mark essays about what kids did in their summer holidays than give a free rein to surly teenagers who want to write about*

zombies. But creativity isn't a smooth ride. Sometimes it demands detours down grimy alleys of the mind, places no adult might want to visit, but which developing teens feel drawn to. As a teacher, you can choose to demand your students tread the straight and narrow line, forcing them to give up on writing or labor on by themselves, alone in the dark. Or you can encourage their imagination and try to help even the most creatively wayward students find their true direction. If you do, you might help the next Poe, Mary Shelley, or Stephen King to blossom. Of course, you might inadvertently create the next Charles Manson, too—but isn't that a risk worth taking?!?

Finally, I want to return to something I said earlier about believing that every child has the potential to change. I truly do believe that. And I believe that books can help even the most unlikely of children rise above the stigmas and lowly positions that society might have laboured them with. And I believe that horror and fantasy books in particular can shine the light of literature and self-discovery deep into even the darkest of teenage minds.

The reason I believe all of that can be explained far more eloquently than I could ever manage by a letter I received some months ago, from a teacher called Melissa in Illinois. I do have to apologize in advance at this point, because the letter contains a swear word. And it's one of the really bad swear words! I considered censoring it, but there's a reason why I'm not going to, which I'll talk about briefly after I've shared Melissa's moving, uplifting letter with you.

*Dear Mr Shan,*

*I would like to thank you for your series of Cirque Du Freak. As a Special Education teacher, I struggle every day with ways to motivate and excite my students about reading. My job is even more of a challenge for several reasons. First, many of my students' parents are Spanish speaking and are unable to assist their children. Second, my students live in extreme poverty and unsafe neighborhoods. It is not uncommon for my students to hear gun shots outside their windows on a nightly basis. Third, and probably most difficult, many of my students have been labeled behavior problems, and some have been told that they will never amount to anything.*

*Your series has changed my students' views on*

*my class and reading as a whole. I can't tell you how wonderful it is to hear them talking about my class, mainly your books, in the halls, at breakfast, and at lunch. They are learning about foreshadowing, inferences, and predictions. They now know how to write mind maps, and they are starting to read with intonations instead of in just a monotone voice. Through your books, I am able to relate to my students, and for that I thank you.*

*In closing, I would like to leave you with a sentence that one of my most difficult students (one of your biggest fans) told me the other day. "Fuck free time! Let's read more!"*

*Sincerely,  
Melissa.*

Again, I apologise for the swearing—but at the same time, in truth, I'm not the least bit sorry! Because that letter was one of the most humbling I have ever received. I honestly found myself blinking back tears when I was first reading it. Then I got to that last line, and I punched the air with joy. Partly because of the sheer exhilaration and joy captured in that simple—albeit crude—outburst by the problem student. But mainly because I loved Melissa's pride in her student. She didn't criticise him for the way he expressed himself, because she was too delighted by *what* he was saying.

I think there's a message in that for all of us. We *can* help teenagers find themselves with the help of books, but sometimes it means re-finding our own inner teenager and meeting them on common ground, first accepting them for who and what they are, not just who and what we hope we can help them become.

#### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> This piece can be found in Shan, D. (2006). Giving reign to horror. *English Teaching Online*, Vol. 1. Retrieved from [http://www.teachit.co.uk/custom\\_content/newsletters/newsletter\\_sep06.asp](http://www.teachit.co.uk/custom_content/newsletters/newsletter_sep06.asp).

*Darren Shan* is the author of the New York Times best-selling *Cirque du Freak* and *Demonata* series. You can learn more about him at his website <http://www.darrenshan.com> and play *The Thin Executioner* computer game, if you have an extra minute or two to race across the icy bridge dodging bats.