

David Baldacci:



A World Away From Crime

Why would an international best-selling crime writer whose twenty-seven titles have sold more than one hundred and ten million copies worldwide turn his hand to writing a fully fledged fantasy novel for young adults? This was the burning question I put to David Baldacci when I met him in London earlier this year. David, who hails from Virginia, was on a whistle stop tour of the UK to promote his latest adult title along with *The Finisher*; a gripping five hundred and twelve page YA adventure story, which takes the reader into an intriguing and unpredictable new world. "You want to challenge yourself as a writer, get out of your comfort zone – I had been very successful writing crime thrillers and mysteries but I wanted to do something different. I loved fantasy as a kid and that genre got me into reading big time and made me want to be a writer."

David originally trained and practised as a lawyer before writing his first political crime thriller, *Absolute Power*, in 1996. It gained immediate success and was swiftly adapted as a major film starring Gene Hackman and Clint Eastwood. Since then he has consistently topped the bestseller charts with his skilfully plotted conspiracy thrillers, many drawing on insider knowledge of the secret service and other covert institutions. He has occasionally dabbled in other genres including writing a series of young children's titles, *Freddy and the French Fries*, which originated as bedtime stories for his two children.

Despite being a prolific author, David found the ideas for *The Finisher* took a long time to ferment. For four and a half years he struggled with just a single idea for a fantasy about a character named Vega Jane. He didn't have the voice, the setting or the plot. Then in the summer of 2012 everything clicked. In six months he wrote two hundred thousand words and, "Vega Jane came out fully formed." At the time, only David's wife knew what he was writing. "She's a very critical reader who tells me if something is not working. This was the first book I'd written when she'd come to me and say, 'Do you

have any more pages?'" David reflects that when the words roll out in this way, a writer may think it's spontaneous, but actually your subconscious has been thinking about it a long time and this simply percolates to the surface.

David told me somewhat gleefully, he sold *The Finisher* to Scholastic under a pseudonym, Janus Pope, (work this conceit out for yourself!). They assumed he was a Brit because of the vernacular and terminology he'd used. "They wanted me to come over from England and meet with them. My agent said 'Well he'd love to meet with you 'cause he's living over here.' So when I walked into their New York headquarters, they said 'Hi David, why are you here?' 'Well, I wrote this book called *The Finisher*....' I wanted the publisher to buy it for the book, not the name."

Within the novel David has conjured up a secretive and often brutal, village society called Wormwood, which is home to Wugmorts (Wugs), and surrounded by the Quag; a forest where no Wug dares to go. The world is primitive, perhaps post-apocalyptic. The opening provides a thrilling introduction to Vega Jane, a feisty fourteen session-old female, who witnesses her friend run into the mysterious Quag. Vega Jane decides to discover what dwells beyond Wormwood for herself; a quest that brings her into intense danger as David slowly builds a world of evil creatures, powerful elders and magical talisman. The plot takes many twists and turns which has the reader rooting for the smart and down-to-earth Vega Jane, as she figures out how to take on male combatants in a fighting tournament and does her best to protect those closest to her. The story is told in the first person, seeing the world through Vega Jane's eyes. "World building is really cool but if you do it in the third person it can also really drag – it's like page after page of laying out the world. I wanted you to see it as she experienced it, sometimes leaving things for the reader to figure out for themselves. I also wanted the world to be small and compact so I could talk about it in great depth."

Vega Jane is a tough, yet vulnerable, character who YA readers will identify with easily. She has no parents and takes care of her brother; a responsibility which has made her grow up fast. Yet she doesn't want to play a mother's role. "In the time period of this book, women are second-class citizens and there is physical domination by men. Vega Jane breaks that mould and she stands up to the males. I like that theme very much." David sees the book as talking about roles in life which are not set in stone and shouldn't define who you are. An allied concern is the need to think for yourself. "The media tell you what you're supposed to think about important issues and we



are whole other worlds yet to come. I didn't want to give everything away in the first book." As with his adult books, he doesn't set out with an outline more than a couple of chapters ahead, preferring to let the story evolve. "Generally I do know the endgame but it can take a lot of different manifestations. I can't possibly know the best way to end the story while I'm just starting to write it!"

Fifteen years ago, David and his wife founded the *Wish You Well Foundation* which offers grants to support family literacy programmes in nearly all fifty US States. Their involvement is very much hands-on, participating in considering the thousands of applications for assistance they receive yearly, visiting the projects

accept it because we are all so busy – we get millions of texts and emails and we have about two seconds to think about stuff. At the epicentre of every catastrophe that humankind has undergone, is the action of people blindly following someone else over the cliff." Vega Jane doesn't accept what people are telling her about her life, the history of Wormwood. She wants to find the truth out for herself.

A further satisfying element to the novel is the way David constructs layers of meaning through the deployment of mythology, historical and religious references. He loves writers such as Tolkien and J.K. Rowling who embed significant meaning to the choices they make for the names of characters, creatures or places. He cites an enigmatic character called Thansius, who is Wormwood's chief of the council. The name is a derivation of Athanasius, a bishop who lived around AD 330 and based his preaching on the Book of Revelation. It is undetermined whether he was ethically a sound person. David notes that in classical works and often in contemporary novels, good and evil is very well labelled, "In my adult books, I write in a world of grey – because the world is not black and white. Similarly in *The Finisher* I didn't want to be so simple as to label people as evil or good." Elsewhere he has had great fun concocting names; a particularly unpleasant creature is based on a dabbit which stems from Islamic mythology, "I thought a jabbit, which is what a serpent actually does, would be a much cooler name so I modified it slightly." The character Duk Dodgson, is a reference to Lewis Carroll, whose real last name was Dodgson and his friend was named Robinson Duckworth.

The Finisher is the first novel of a series. David doesn't know how many books there will be. "With most YA series, typically in the first book you know the whole world and the type of evil to be confronted. In this book, all you know is Wormwood. You haven't even got to the Quag yet, and what lies beyond – there

where grants have been made and constantly advocating the need for there to be policies to combat adult illiteracy. They also run a programme called *Feeding Body and Mind*; an inspired idea in its simplicity, which links in with the two hundred and forty food banks across the USA. "We piggy back the pipeline so when people come in and seek food assistance, they can go home with books. The incentive is: we feed you and we will also teach you to read." David is passionate about tackling low literacy skills envisaging America becoming a nation in which there are more people who cannot read than who can. "Millions of homes in the USA have no books in them. The parent arrives with the kid who may never have owned a book; they go home with something that can lift them out of poverty; gaining better reading skills and ultimately better jobs. The catalyst for about 80% of those who can't read is when a kid comes to them with a book and says 'Hey Mum/Dad, can you read this to me?' If they can't read it they think, 'I need to do something.' It is a way to attack poverty and literacy at the same time." The books, which are new and "gently used", are largely donated by David's fans. In the last four years, over a million books have been distributed through the *Feeding Body and Mind* programme.

David had begun by telling me he became a writer because he wanted to have that effect on people's lives which words on a page can have. It's clear he connects with so many people through his craft of storytelling and life-enhancing philanthropy.

Elaine Chant

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