

The BiblioFiles: Joseph Delaney

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DR. DANA: The All Ages Show, The Cotsen Children's Library, and WPRB present The BiblioFiles.

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DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, I'll be talking with Joseph Delaney, author of The Last Apprentice series for young adult readers. The books tell the dark, spooky, and intriguing tale of Thomas Ward, a young apprentice whose job is to deal with the frightening things that inhabit the night. As the series progresses, Tom's job gets more difficult, and the stakes get higher for his master, and his close and highly suspect friend, Alice, who has a habit of dabbling in dark magic.

The first book in the series, *Revenge of the Witch*, was published in 2005. There are now five books, with more on the way. The Last Apprentice series is full of suspense, ancient lore, and terrifying creatures. The books are written in simple, yet highly descriptive prose, and the visual elements are enhanced by chilling, black and white illustrations at the beginning of each chapter. If you love a good scary story, this series is definitely for you.

Mr. Delaney's books have been printed in 24 languages, and a film version of the first book is currently in pre-production. The newest book in the series, *The Spook's Tale*, is due out in April. Mr. Delaney joins us from Lancashire, England. Mr. Delaney, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yes, great.

DR. DANA: What are these books about?

JOSEPH DELANEY: Basically, the Spook is a sort of exorcist that deals with the dark-- ghosts, and ghastrs, and boggarts, particularly, and which is basically about the training of a boy to replace him. Tom's only not quite 13 when the book starts. And it's a race against time. The Spook's getting on a little bit, really. Tom will be the last apprentice. That's why it's such a good title in America.

DR. DANA: I always wondered how an author gets the first idea for his or her book. Did this series start with a character, or a phrase, a picture in your head, a memory?

JOSEPH DELANEY: It came with a bit of a panic, really. I had not been published, and I was given the chance to write a book for an editor who was interested in a fantasy, but I only had a month to do it. I actually did have an idea-- not a clear, good idea-- but I've always kept notebooks, going back for years and years and years. So I searched back through the notebooks-- this is in the year 2000, 2001-- and I had to go all the way back to 1983, when I formed the idea for *The Spook's Apprentice*, or *The Last Apprentice*, as you call it in America.

In 1983, I'd moved house. I worked in a town called Blackpool, but we wanted to live in a village somewhere on the outskirts, and we found this place called Stalmine. And basically, only when we moved into the house, did I find out that Stalmine had a boggart. Years ago-- there's no dates attached-- they called in a priest, and he found this noisy, troublesome boggart under the step of a cottage belonging to the local church.

So I wrote it in my notebook. The idea was a man who deals with boggarts and things that go bump in the night. So there it was, in 1983, I'd gone all the way back by the time I found it, and that became *The Last Apprentice*.

DR. DANA: And the books themselves take place in a different century. Did you base them in this century where the boggart was bound by the priest?

JOSEPH DELANEY: Not at all, really. I don't know use dates.

DR. DANA: Yes, I know.

JOSEPH DELANEY: It's actually set in a real place called Lancashire. That's where I live in England. I never use dates at all, basically. It's sort of distant, vague past. That's what the film people ask me. "We want to get it right-- the costumes and architecture."

And they said to me, "What century do you think the books are set in?" And I said, "They're not set in any century. It's a sort of a mythical county, a mythical Lancashire." And he said back to me, "Well, will you accept the 17th century?" And I thought, well, that's reasonable, only because we had the Lancashire Witch Trials in 1612. And I think, in America, the Salem Witch Trials were in the late 17th century, I believe, aren't they?

DR. DANA: I believe so. Yeah.

JOSEPH DELANEY: I think, if historically, you looked at it, it wouldn't quite add up, because you've got canals, you've got coal mines-- it's pre-industrial. It seems a little medieval at times. It's a hodgepodge of different things. It's a world that, truly, never really existed.

DR. DANA: Thing that makes it even more terrifying is that, when you leave your house, when you leave your village, there are no street lamps. The things that are lurking out there are truly just a step away in the dark.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah, this is true. There are not tarmac roads, no street lamps. There are no planes, or cars-- no technology and such. And you would not go to the next village at night. You would actually look out there and it'd be terrifying. Not only would you think there might be things out there-- there probably would be things out there, whether witches, or boggarts, or whatever.

And the trouble is, in this world, these things sometimes encroach upon the farms and villages. They come upon the dark from the outside, into your little world. And that's why you need the

Spook. The Spook is a sort of exorcist. You send for him, and he works for money. And he will actually get rid of the supernatural infestation, whatever it is, really.

DR. DANA: So, the main character, Thomas Ward, is the youngest in a large farming family. And he is, as you mentioned, about 12 years old when he is apprenticed to the Spook.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah.

DR. DANA: And he has a very dangerous, tough job, and he sees a lot of evil-- more than the average kid-- and yet, the thing I like about Tom is, instead of turning bitter, he manages to remain this kind, respectful, positive person, even though he has to do terrible things for his apprenticeship. Can you tell us a little bit about this character, Tom, and how you developed him?

JOSEPH DELANEY: Well, basically, I think I started off with the idea that Tom-- it's part of folklore, the idea that the seventh son's got special powers. He can actually see and talk to the dead. He's got a degree of immunity against witches, for example. But he's also been brought up as the youngest son of a farming family. And he's worked hard, and his dad has taught him good manners. He's got morals.

DR. DANA: Yes, he has great manners.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah, exactly. But as time goes on, this is one thing that's happening with the series. I think he starts to have to compromise a little bit. He has to survive. He can't quite be that honest, always truth-telling boy that he once was. But he still retains that essential niceness, I think, basically.

DR. DANA: Many books for young adults-- and, especially, fantasy books-- they fall into the trap of simply portraying good versus evil. While your books of characters that are clearly, clearly evil, many of the main characters walk the line between good and evil. And the best example of this is Alice, Tom's best friend. She's been raised by malevolent witches. She does dark magic. She's absolutely not trusted by Mr. Gregory, Tom's master-- and actually, no one else, for that matter-- but she's incredibly loyal to Tom, and saves his life on many occasions, even if it means putting herself in danger.

At the same time, she's not averse to using dark magic to solve problems. For someone whose job it is to battle the dark, that doesn't really help. And so, she's incredibly complicated, and even after five books, I'm really not sure what I think about her, or even if I trust her. So, how do you manage to create these complexities, especially with Alice?

JOSEPH DELANEY: Well, I think one thing that's true is that I really don't plot, so I'm not good at the story arc all the way through to the end. I don't quite know how things are going to develop, I rely on intuition, and experience, and various sorts of other things, basically. But Alice-- she's like us all. None of us are either totally good, or totally bad.

And Alice has got this sort of a handicap, in the sense that she has not only come from a clan of witches, she spent, actually, two years being trained as a witch by Bony Lizzie. That's the point, really. But she loves Tom. That's what it is, really. Tom, in a way, is her redemption. That's what it is, partly. That's also the problem with Tom, because the Spook believes that Tom will be dragged to the dark, and he thinks the most likely way that Tom will be dragged away from the light into the dark is because of the friendship he has with Alice.

DR. DANA: And yet, Mr. Gregory, the Spook, is a bit of a hypocrite, because--

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah.

DR. DANA: --when he was given the choice of choosing one of his girlfriends, who was a witch, he had the choice to drag her to the dark or light. And he decided not to drag her into a pit, which is typically what you do with witches in these books. But he modified it, and is now keeping her prisoner, more or less, in one of his houses.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Basically. He actually did fall in love with a Lamia witch. That was the point. I suppose his idea is, my apprentice should learn from my mistakes, to a certain extent. But yeah, he's a flawed character, I think. Again, that's well makes him interesting, to a certain extent, because he's neither totally good, nor totally bad. He's human. He's got failings, and he's got faults.

In the first book, for example, he came out with that phrase, and I didn't even know he was going to say it. One morning I was writing, and it just came out. He said, "Never trust a woman."

I thought, oh, that was a bit controversial, et cetera, et cetera. But then, because I left it in, and I thought about what it all meant. Why would he say such a thing? And that's why I wrote the third book, the book which is *The Night of the Soul Stealer*. That explains why. That's when you find out why you should never trust a woman, because he's been involved with some rather strange women, like Meg, the Lamia witch.

DR. DANA: And, to add to that, never trust a woman with pointy shoes.

JOSEPH DELANEY: With the pointy shoes, yes.

DR. DANA: Why pointy shoes?

JOSEPH DELANEY: I don't know. Again, that just came into my head. Not being a man that looks at women's feet that much, I didn't realize they'd actually stopped wearing pointy shoes. But of course, pointy shoes. It's a fashion. They come in cycles, don't they?

DR. DANA: They do.

JOSEPH DELANEY: You have to think to yourself, what does it all mean, this pointy shoes business? I don't know. But I had decided that pointy shoes would be an indicator that a girl--

one of the village girls, especially-- is a likely witch, a potential witch. So that became the rule for the fiction.

DR. DANA: The books are told from Tom's perspective.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah.

DR. DANA: And he has a very simple way of telling a tale, but it's also highly descriptive. I really like this narrative style, and I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read a passage that illustrates how Tom can tell a story. He can set the mood, and he can relate some very scary things in a really simple manner.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yes, certainly. This is an act struck from *The Last Apprentice: The Curse of the Bane*-- from my first chapter, actually.

DR. DANA: In this passage, Tom is about to bind his first boggart, which requires digging a deep pit, hiring some masons to build a stone, lowering a contraption filled with blood into the pit, and so it's very complicated and very stressful. And this is the first time that Tom has done it alone.

JOSEPH DELANEY: "Quietly, we waited for the boggart.

After a few minutes, I heard it coming. At first it sounded just like the wind whistling through the trees.

But there was no wind. The air was perfectly still, and in a narrow band of starlight between the edge of a thundercloud and the horizon, the crescent moon was visible, adding its pale light to that cast by the lanterns.

The rigger and his mate could hear nothing, of course, because there weren't seventh sons of seventh sons like me. So I had to warn them.

'It's on its way,' I said, 'I'll tell you when.'

By now the sound of his approach had become more shrill, almost like a scream, and I could hear something else, too: a sort of low, rumbling growl. It was coming across the graveyard fast, heading straight for the dish of blood inside the pit.

Unlike a normal boggart, a ripper is slightly more than a spirit, especially when it's just been feeding. Even then, most people can't see it, but they can feel it all right, if it ever gets a grip on their flesh.

Even I didn't see much-- just something shapeless and a sort of pinky red. Then I felt a movement of the air close to my face and the ripper went down into the pit.

I said, 'When,' to the rigger, who, in turn, nodded to his mate, who tightened his grip on the short chain. Even before he pulled it, there came a sound from the pit. This time, it was loud, and all three of us heard it. I glanced quickly at my companions and saw their eyes widen and mouths tighten with the fear of what was below us.

The sound we heard was a boggart feeding from the dish. It was like the greedy lapping of some monstrous tongue, combined with the ravenous snuffling and snorting of a big carnivorous animal. We had less than a minute or so before it finished it all. Then it would sense our blood. It was rogue now, and we were all on the menu."

DR. DANA: Often, in fantasy books, there is magic, and sometimes, there's a wand or staff required. Sometimes it exists as an exterior source. But the magic in your books-- I almost don't want to call it magic. I'm not sure what to call it, but it is very practical. In fact, there's a guide in the back of each and every one of the books in the series, where they're writing down this practical information-- like they're taking notes in a college lecture.

I would almost say that the magic is more like lore come to life. You use iron and salt to battle the dark. You dig pits to imprison things with stones. How did you decide to represent this magic, this force, and the behaviors of the creatures in your books?

JOSEPH DELANEY: I don't know. Gradually, as I developed the book-- and I think the first one was developed over 18 months or so. I write one a year now, but then it was sort of a longer period to think about them. I think I decided that they wouldn't use magic, which, I think, was a bit different. It's a craft. It's a trade.

DR. DANA: That's it.

JOSEPH DELANEY: It's a little bit like science, in a sense, because you try things out. And some things work, and some things don't. And the important thing is, you record it in your notebooks. The Spook's got a big library, where all the Spooks who have lived before him recorded their experiences, and their adventures, and what they've learned about the dark. So you use practical things, as you say, like salt and iron, like Rowan wood. Those things which have proved, by trial and error, if you will, effective against the dark.

It's all recorded there, and that's what the apprenticeship is. It's five years learning the lore that you need to actually fight the dark.

DR. DANA: And so, did you just pick up these things from your childhood, of hearing stories? Or did you do some research? Or did you watch lots of scary movies?

JOSEPH DELANEY: All of this stuff is in your head already. I didn't do much research. I know the idea of the Rowan wood, and the silver. Mostly it comes out of folklore. Everything had got its weakness, for example. Just to take the Lamia witch, which has got two forms, the Feral and the Domestic Lamia-- if you Google, for example, the Lamia, you'll get all kinds of Greek mythology. There is more than one version. But mine-- I took that idea, and I changed it, and I made them witches, and then changed the rules a little bit, basically.

But that's what I do. The only book I researched for properly, really, I suppose, was *The Attack of the Fiend*, because it was based upon the Pendle witches. That's an historical account. There's more than one account of it. I think eight women were hanged at Lancaster Castle. Not poor little witches at all, you see, but basically, I did all the research and I thought about it.

Then, in the end, I decided to kick to my fictional witches. And apart from, I think, Roger Nowell, who was the prosecutor at Lancaster Castle, where the witches were tried-- I put him into the book, but I changed him. I made him different. It's all very much a fiction.

DR. DANA: I love your witches. They are just really mean.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Oh, yeah. The Domestic the bone witches and blood witches-- they need blood and bones to make the magic work. That's how horrible it is.

DR. DANA: So, how does the world in these books compare to the real world you live in? I know you mentioned the Pendle witches. There are other locations-- in fact, I saw a BBC interview with you, where you were walking with a gentleman on a hillside, investigating some graves.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah, that's right. That's a place that went into the second book, the stone graves. Nobody really knows how old they are. They're beside the St. Patrick's chapel. The ruin at the site is 600 A.D. I put that into the book, as well. But nobody's ever been able to properly date. I think they had stone lids on those graves, at one point. No one can date them properly, so no one really knows.

But yeah, I put real locations in. I can't really point you to Chipping-- there's a place called Chipping, which is to the east of Lancashire. I couldn't actually point the Spook's house out, if you understand what I mean, but I have a good idea of where it would be. Very much, it is based upon the geography of Lancashire, to a certain extent, anyway.

DR. DANA: Do you think that the film crews are going to shoot on location, for some of these places?

JOSEPH DELANEY: I hope so. I heard a whisper, from more than one source, said they have, at some point in the past, checked out with the Lancashire County Authority about locations. But you never really know. It would be great if they would come here and actually film in the places where the books are set.

DR. DANA: So, could you tell us about Sam, from your childhood?

JOSEPH DELANEY: Oh, right. That's the bit that went into the first book. When I was a child, I had a recurring nightmare. And I'm not quite sure-- I must've been five, six, seven-- something like that. In the first book, the Spook takes Tom to a haunted house-- this is at midnight-- go down to the cellar, and face what's lurking down there. At one point, something sort of picks Tom up and then takes him toward the cellar.

But we didn't have a cellar, actually. I invented that part. But what we did was a coal hole. The coal man would arrive, and he'd tip his sacks of coal into the hole under the stairs. So basically, in this nightmare, I would be stuck in the front room-- just me-- stuck in a hearth room, start a nice, flickering, warm coal fire. It'd be dark, be night. And my mother would be sat there, knitting away. And I'd hear this thing coming from the coal hole, kind of a breathing, and footsteps.

And I'd look, after a while, because I'd have the dream more than once, and I knew exactly what was about to happen. This thing would pick me up, and it would will carry me towards the dark. I'd be trying to say to my mother, "Help, Mother, help," but she just ignored me. I think she couldn't hear me. She would carry on knitting.

Just like in nightmares, and in the genre itself-- I didn't know the genre at that age-- things go darker, the fire dies in the grate. You got paralyzed. And it would pick me up and carry me toward the dark. And there's a nasty little twist to this, as well.

My brother, for example, used to have the same dream. Being the younger brother, I told him the dream I was having. We very quickly started to have the same dream. We believe we were in the same nightmare together, sometimes, and we had a pact, an agreement-- so if you managed to wake yourself up--because it was a lucid dream-- you knew you were dreaming, you knew you were heading for the dark under the stairs-- and you were in a race against time to wake yourself up. So if one of us woke up first, you always have to wake your brother up, just in case he was having the same dream.

I mean, many times I've been not dreaming at all, and he'd wake me up, and say, "I just had the dream." But he couldn't say anything. But the dark twist is that, we believe-- and I don't know which one of us invented it first, or where it came from-- but if ever we were taken into the dark, under the stairs, into the coal hole, we would die in our sleep. and be trapped in the nightmare forever. So you can imagine how desperate we were to wake up.

DR. DANA: As the book progresses, we learn things about Tom's family-- things that suggested some powerful forces that he must face, that are originated in Greece. So, why Greece? Because the county where Tom lives is full of mud, rain, cold, and fog. Why this beautiful, sunny Greece?

JOSEPH DELANEY: Why did Mam come from Greece?

DR. DANA: Yes, that's where his mother's from.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah. I really can't explain these things that drop into your head, and once you've decided that. And I'm not sure where it came from, honestly. Once you've decided that, changes everything. For example, the book I'm writing now-- I'm not sure what it's going to be called in America-- I'll not talk about the Spook's Tale, I'll talk about the big one that will come out later this year-- and it's going to be called The Spook's Sacrifice in England.

So it's The Last Apprentice. I don't know what the title will be yet, in America. But, in that, we finally find out what Mam is. And we go back to Greece with Tom and Mam, and various other

people, travel to Greece to face an enemy there. All these things-- I don't know where they come from, but they've all pointed to what might possibly happen in the future of the books.

DR. DANA: Yes, up until now we've had hints that Mam is witch, that she, at one time, was immortal-- these are some rumors that float around, that she was someone who was extremely powerful, and she's got some relatives who show up to save Tom, but they're of a very dubious nature, themselves. And so, you start to think, well, exactly who is Tom? Some of these witches have mentioned, in this tantalizing way, that his shadow doesn't look right in the moonlight.

JOSEPH DELANEY: The mystery of what Mam is-- if you've read all the books, you can start to work out what she might be. You do find out in the next book-- not *The Spook's Tale*, I'm talking about *The Spook's Sacrifice*, the one that will come out later in the year. You actually do find out what Mam is.

DR. DANA: The latest book in the series, *The Spook's Tale*, is due out this month. What can you tell us about it?

JOSEPH DELANEY: In that collection, there are two or three short stories. The first one, *The Spook's Tale*, is a short version. It explains how John Gregory-- who is now Tom's master-- first encountered the dark. I don't want to give too much away, basically, but it's John Gregory telling his tale of his very first adventure with the dark.

There's also, in the collection-- Grimalkin, the witch assassin, has her little story, and she tells how she became the witch assassin of the Malkin clan.

DR. DANA: And you also-- and I hope this isn't giving too much away- you find out, finally, the Spook's pet boggart. Who is this supernatural housekeeper at his house One of my favorite characters in this is this boggart. And before, we've encountered boggarts who are rippers-- drinking blood, chasing people down, snatching up children in the dark-- but this one is a housekeeper at the Spook's house, and cooks and cleans. And there's also the defense system for the house, but I'm really interested to find out about this particular character.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah, but I'm not quite sure you will find out in this collection.

DR. DANA: Oh, no?

JOSEPH DELANEY: No, next year I'm writing a thing called *The Bestiary*. It's like of an encyclopedia of all these sorts of creatures that inhabit the Spook's world. Basically, it's going to be illustrated. Any it was going to come out, probably in October, possibly in America as well as Britain. Unfortunately, the office needs more time to complete it, so it has to be put back.

In that *Bestiary*, that's where you get the account of how the boggart came to be in the Spook's garden.

DR. DANA: So I have to wait a little bit longer.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Yeah, sorry. I'm busy now, for example, in England. In addition to what's coming out in America, I've got to write another four or five witch stories to fill the slot The Bestiary was going to fill, because that's going to be put back to 2010, you see.

DR. DANA: Do you have four hands to do all this writing? What's the secret?

JOSEPH DELANEY: I'm trying to write Spook seven. And at the same time, I'm trying to write five witch stories before the end of March, which is a little bit hard.

DR. DANA: So, what do you do when you write? Do you just sit down with the world's biggest cup of tea?

JOSEPH DELANEY: I'm back to what I used to do. I used to get up really early. I don't get up that early, but when I get up in the morning, I'll sit down to write for two or three hours, just with coffee and not food, because once I've eaten, it doesn't seem as easy to write, for some strange reason.

But basically, I just type straight into the computer. But if I'm stuck, I'll be down to dropping things on paper, and drawing spider diagrams, and different things to work out the plot. So, if I'm not sat down with my notebook, if I'm actually typing stuff straight into the computer, things are going well.

DR. DANA: I imagine you hunched over a candle with a quill pen at 2:00 a.m.

JOSEPH DELANEY: The only time you'll find me actually writing with a pen is when in spring and summer, when it's warm enough. I'll go out into the garden and write in long hand, and then type it all into the computer at a later time.

DR. DANA: My final question for you today is: what question would you, the author, like to ask us, your readers?

JOSEPH DELANEY: Basically, it's a question that would get a different answer from everybody if I did it to my friends. It's nice to find out what people like about the books, what they like best, what they think works. And also, to what extent things don't work as well. In fact, I get criticism and find out I could make your books more exciting, or whatever. That kind of thing. And I do get that kind of feedback sometimes, when I talk to people.

DR. DANA: Well, Mr. Delaney, thank you so much for talking with us today.

JOSEPH DELANEY: Thank you very much.

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