



Douglas & McIntyre

EXTRAS

DANIEL O'THUNDER

by Ian Weir

JACK, THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR.

From the start, I had it in mind that O'Thunder's story would be told by several different narrators, each of whom had a partial (and sometimes conflicting) version of the "truth." That's the narrative structure of the Gospels, and Daniel is in one sense a kind of cockeyed Christ figure—he's the centre of the story, but we're never right inside his head, and ultimately we can never quite pin him down. As in the Gospels, we're then dealing with a hero who is the sum of other people's perceptions and projections.

When I started writing, Jack was actually no more important than the other narrators. But he started to grow more central – and less reliable – as we got to know each other. And I was partway through the first draft when I suddenly realized that this whole edifice was a "Book of Daniel" that Jack was collating long after the fact. That answered a whole lot of questions for me, and it also led to the realization that Jack is actually the novel's protagonist—when all is said and done, it's Jack's journey that forms the spine of it all. This gave me a moment or two of Feeling Quite Clever, which is always a highly agreeable sensation. But more importantly, it gave me a glimpse of what the story was actually trying to be about, down there at the core (which is something I never begin to get a handle on until the second or third draft). At the end of the day it's a story about faith and belief, on various levels – at least, it is in part – or at least I think it is. And Jack is a man who needs desperately to believe in Daniel, in order to sustain some scrap of belief in himself.

THE DATE: 1800s. THE PLACE: DICKENSIAN LONDON. THE SPORT: PUGILISM.

London is my favourite city in the world – and Dickens is my favourite novelist – and so images relating to both have been stewing in my imagination for decades. As a university student doing an MA at King's College years ago, I lived on the northern fringes of Holborn, so my trek to college each day took me through the same district of London in which Dickens lived and set so many of his scenes.

I started ramping up my research a couple of years before I started writing; it was both intensive and pretty scattershot. In part it was just a glorious excuse to read and re-read scads of Victorian literature—novels written in the nineteenth century, plus contemporary novels set in the period (writers such as A.S. Byatt, Sarah Waters, Michel Faber, Michael Cox and John MacLaughlan Gray, to name just a handful of my personal favourites). The one exception was Dickens. I couldn't read a word of Dickens, especially after I actually began writing—his voice is just too overwhelming. A few chapters of Charles, and I'd spend the next three days writing execrable sub-Dickens pastiche.

Then there was the more specific historical research, to which I also took a fairly scattergun approach, on the premise that you never know where you'll find a great little detail. I spent weeks in the company of Henry

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Mayhew, whose four-volume *London Labour and the London Poor* is an enthralling tour through the mid-Victorian underclass and has been pillaged by everyone since Dickens himself. There are a zillion Victorian websites out there, and I visited a whack of them. But I'm mainly a book guy, and so I read as many as I could: sociological studies, popular histories such as Peter Ackroyd's stunning *London: the Biography*, studies of Victorian vice by writers such as Fergus Linnane and Steven Marcus, Richard Holmes' books on soldiers and war, brilliant oddities such as Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher* (which delves down into the investigation of a real mid-Victorian murder case).

As for the boxing, I began with Pierce Egan's utterly splendid *Boxiana*, a history of British pugilism published in 1829. That was actually a couple of decades before the period of *Daniel O'Thunder*, but Egan's language and his evocation of those ancient battlers are irresistible. I also read several contemporary studies of boxing history, including Bob Mee's excellent and engaging *Bare Fists*.

BOXING FAN FOR LIFE?

Blush. Yup, I've been a boxing fan since I was a kid, when I idolized Muhammad Ali and spent hours poring over *Ring Magazine* and *Boxing Illustrated*, to the point at which I can to this very day – among my repertoire of useless and irritating parlour tricks – recite by memory the list of heavyweight champions from Gentleman Jim Corbett onward.

In self-defense, I would say (sheepishly) that boxing seems to have fascinated a lot of writers. And not just the ones you'd expect, like Hemingway, but writers like Joyce Carol Oates and even George Bernard Shaw – yes, that famous socialist and vegetarian – who actually wrote a novel about a boxer. It's called *Cashel Byron's Profession*, and it is possibly the lamest book ever penned by a writer of genius.

For what it's worth, my theory is that boxing fascinates many writers because it's an intensely isolated endeavour – a prize ring is the loneliest place in the universe – that strips the psyche naked. In that sense it is actually like writing a book, apart from the fact that the novelist isn't getting punched in the head every three seconds. Although it frequently feels that way.

HISTORICAL FIGURES & LITERARY INFLUENCES

Apart from the tongue-in-cheek cameo involving a decrepit Duke of Wellington, none of the characters is drawn directly from the historical record. As a reader, I'm certainly fond of historical novels that reinvent actual history, but in this case I was mainly interested in using the period as the context for a made-up story. Some of the characters are based on people I know – or rather, they contain bits and pieces of several people – but mainly they started to take shape as I started to write about them, which is the way characters always emerge for me. And I guess on some level they're all projections of some sliver of myself. After all, to quote Jack: "Any man must ultimately write of himself, even when he writes of the Devil."

Literary influences? Well, I'm hoping there are so many of them that no single one sticks out too blatantly, since I think that's kind of what "originality" means. Mount Dickens looms in the background, obviously. But above all *Daniel O'Thunder* is a novel of voices – looked at a certain way it's actually an interweaving of monologues – and in that sense it has been shaped by my background as a stage playwright.

THE SCREEN VS. THE PAGE

As a dramatist, in whatever form, you're always collaborating with other artists—actors, directors, designers, musicians. All of them are bringing something vital to the table, which means the writer doesn't have to worry about whole whacks of the overall vision. (What does the room actually look like? Hey, don't ask me. That's Set Dec.) As a novelist, you're responsible for everything. That's the first difference, and it's immense.

Another huge difference is the sheer bloody size of a novel. Obviously I knew going into the process that novels are longer than plays or screenplays, but in the early stages this awareness was essentially an abstract and

intellectual one. Kind of the same way you're intellectually aware – sitting there in your urban living room – that grizzly bears are dangerous. About a hundred pages in, the visceral understanding began to creep up on me, with horrible ursine snufflings: novels are long. Novels are really long. Novels are entirely incommensurate with the human lifespan, which is short. And if indeed you actually manage to finish writing a novel? Then you have to – God help us – rewrite it.

But in a way, the biggest shock of all was the discovery that you actually have to finish a novel, at some point. That sounds nonsensical, but in fact I'm serious. As a dramatist, you're never finished writing. With a stage play, you continue rewriting right through rehearsals and previews, and can fix problems even after the show has opened. With a movie or TV show, you're effectively rewriting all the way through post-production, in the editing suite. And at every step of the way, you're surrounded by other people, any one of whom can exclaim: "Hang on, this plot-point has a hole you could drive a truck through." At which point there is a flurry of panic, until someone else exclaims: "No, it's okay, I see how to fix it!" But once a novel is finished, it's finished. One last neurotic scan of the proofs, and off it goes into the world, with all its imperfections on its head.

DANIEL O'THUNDER GOES TO HOLLYWOOD: CASTING CALL FOR THE BIG SCREEN

Even if I knew who I'd choose to play Daniel, Jack, Nell, Jaunty and Piper in the movie, I'd play coy, on the grounds that a novelist should let the reader do the casting. But in fact I find it virtually impossible to imagine specific actors in the roles, since I see the characters as real people. That may seem a strange admission, especially from someone who has spent most of his career as a dramatist and been deeply involved in casting—but it's the truth!

FAVOURITE WRITERS

If I was choosing the collected works of one writer to take into exile on a desert island, it would be Dickens. It's not that I think he's the best novelist of all time – let alone the best writer – because of course he isn't; not even close. But he makes me feel joyful and utterly human.

Other novelists? Well, among lots of others, I love Barry Unsworth, Henry Fielding, Sarah Waters, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Arthur Conan Doyle, Steven Galloway, William Trevor, E.L. Doctorow, Martin Amis, Patrick O'Brian. I've read *Lord of the Rings* at least six times, so I suspect that puts Tolkien on the list. If we're expanding the list beyond novelists, then Chekhov, Tom Stoppard, Thomas Malory, Simon Gray, Michael Frayn, Harold Pinter, P.G. Wodehouse (who kind of wrote novels, but not really). Lately I've been on a kick reading younger dramatists: Connor McPherson, Martin McDonough, Stephen Adly Guirgis. Or at any rate, that's today's list of faves. If you asked me tomorrow, I'm sure it would look different.

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