

AUTHOR – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

SELF PUBLISHING

- **WHY DID YOU GO DOWN THE SELF-PUBLISHING ROUTE? DID YOU APPROACH OTHER PUBLISHERS FIRST?**

Yes, initially I pursued the usual channels but found that conventional publishing houses were simply returning the manuscript unread with a standard rejection letter saying their client list was full – which is pretty disheartening but fairly common.

As I have had work published before I knew how notoriously difficult the industry is – which is why we started to look into the self-publishing option. We quickly discovered that many of these companies were not up to the professional standards we expected which I think is one of the reasons self-publishing has a bad reputation. Then we came across Penpress and one of the first things that struck me about Penpress was that they were not like vanity publishers, they provided an entire package including marketing and distribution. I was also impressed that

they insist upon one of their editors doing a specific reader's report before they will consider the project and they clearly didn't make money from the initial press copies of the book but rather from subsequent sales which meant it was in their best interests to make the project as successful as possible. I think that the conventional face of publishing is going to be changed quite dramatically by companies like Penpress who don't just sit back and hope the book sells but actively go out seeking related sponsorship and key placement of books with Waterstones, Amazon.com etc.

For example they secured a fantastic deal with the international jewellers Swarovski who have designed a valuable locket as part of an online competition we are running. They also persuaded bespoke costumiers Bolli Darling to sponsor some gorgeous outfits for promotional purposes. I really couldn't see, for example, Penguin or Hodder making the same effort for an unknown children's writer. Conventional publishing houses want some sort of proven track record or to see a degree of success by which point of course the author has already done a lot of the related work!

To be honest there are so many other benefits to self publishing – for example you have more creative control and the royalties are MUCH more substantial.

Also I think one also has to remember that some of the greatest writers have self published such as Walt Whitman, Virginia Woolf, Rudyard Kipling, DH Lawrence and James Joyce to name a few. Let's face it in the music industry it's standard practise to pay for sample CDs or indeed to set up your own company to produce your own music, so I don't see why publishing your own work should be any different.

- **SO WHAT EXACTLY IS INVOLVED IF YOU SELF PUBLISH? WHAT DO YOU GET OTHER THAN YOUR BOOK IN PRINT?**

Firstly I think people go down the self-publishing route for many reasons and it depends what you want from it – it might be a collection of poetry, a family project or a localised piece of writing that you might only require a small print run for.

You might want to self publish as a spring board to larger things such as using it as a more professional introduction to larger publishing houses, gaining press interest or maybe even to approach film production companies with.

Personally I decided to self publish because I was fed up with the constant 'closed door' policy that so many larger publishing houses have with new authors and I had been encouraged by recent success stories such as 'The Shadowmancer' who had initially gone down the self publish route. With Penpress I liked the idea that they dealt with the whole package and that it was in their best interests to actively promote the book, as this is where they earn their money. Neither my husband or I suffer fools gladly - my husband was a Queen's Council before we moved to Spain – so we spent a long time researching exactly what we wanted and what we would have to invest to make a success of this project. This

was never about just seeing my work in print but more about finding the best professionals to work with to achieve our aims.

To be honest even if a large publishing house approached us now, I really couldn't see any benefit - after all once the ground work has been done and a reliable relationship is in place why let somebody else reap the benefits of all the hard work that has already been achieved? The trouble with the conventional publishing market is that you as the writer are expected to prove yourself before they become interested. As a businesswoman, I think this makes no sense unless you are simply interested in the 'snob' value of being with a so-called 'proper publishing house' which quite frankly I'm not. The bottom line is that (a) I earn a lot more money this way and (b) I get a lot more value from my initial investment. Equally anybody going down the self-publishing route really must put in the research before committing money, as there are a lot of inferior companies out there. Unfortunately it's companies like these that give self-publishing a bad name.

- **WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO INVEST SO MUCH MONEY, AFTER ALL IT'S A BIG RISK TO TAKE ESPECIALLY IN THE BOOK INDUSTRY?**

My husband and I have worked together on a variety of successful business interests before and would never invest money before seriously weighing up all the cons and pros – every business is a risk, that's the nature of business there are no guarantees.

I've spent over five years assembling the ideas, characters and plotlines behind this series of books, because there are seven in total. When we first decided to publish with Penpress, though we knew they would work hard to place the book, we also realised that to maximise the impact the book would have that it was essential to create a marketing budget. You can have the best product in the world but if nobody knows about it they're not going to buy it. Also we were overwhelmed by the positive response Penpress were getting from people they were approaching, like Swarovski and Bolli Darling and I think we felt it was important to 'put our money where our mouths were'.

THE LOCKET COMPETITION

- **WHAT'S THE IDEA BEHIND THE LOCKET COMPETITION AND HOW DID YOU GET SWAROVSKI AS THE SPONSOR BEHIND THIS?**

The competition was actually the idea of Penpress. They felt that because The Zartarbia Tales was a series of seven that we should make a big splash with the book launch. We were inspired by something that the writer Kit Williams did around 20 years ago, where he designed a beautiful golden bee, which could be won by one of the readers. We loved the idea of creating something individual and special, something expensive – a really amazing prize. The Locket of Fire and Water is an intrinsic part of The Zartarbia Tales and is the locket that allows Isabella to enter this strange and magical world. Penpress approached a few jewellers and when Swarovski expressed an interest we were delighted, after all they have such a superb reputation. Their work is so diverse and I think the magic in the book will be perfectly translated in the stunning locket they have designed. We then decided to create an on-line game where people can enter which is www.zartarbia.com

- **SO HOW CAN PEOPLE ENTER?**

By logging onto www.zartarbia.com. The game works on two levels; one where the player is chased around a map of Zartarbia chased by the evil Sectica and the second where the player has to guess where the locket is hidden. The competition runs from the 21st October to the 28th February next year with the winner being announced shortly after that.

THE ZARTARBIA TALES – BOOK 1

- **WHAT'S THE INSPIRATION FOR THE BOOKS? WHO IS GREAT AUNT CIS?**

As a child I would visit my Great Auntie Cis on a regular basis and she was headmistress of a private school called Raventhorpe in Darlington, which as far as I know still exists. She was a fantastic lady and enormous fun, always encouraging us to read. She would often help us put on impromptu performances and she had a room in the attic which was full of stage scenery and costumes. To be honest all the descriptions of Raventhorpe are based totally on my memories of the happy times I spent there. Unfortunately Auntie Cis passed away several years ago and I felt I wanted to do something special in her memory – which is where the initial concept of the Zartarbia Tales came from.

- **WHAT IS ZARTARBIA?**

Zartarbia is an ancient, mythic world that is divided between the evil Syndicate (a group of villains based upon the seven deadly sins) and the other half are protected by The Federation Against Dark Forces headed by Detective Valise. To understand the nature of Zartarbia you firstly have to understand this is an ever-changing jigsaw of territories that shrink and expand, moving continually. There is a constant war with The Syndicate trying to forcibly take control of the remaining lands and the FADF battling to maintain freedom.

- **WHO IS THE SYNDICATE?**

The Syndicate members are based upon the seven deadly sins. Mistress Sectica represents Pride, Oro Cazador - Gluttony, Tempest Pestilencia - Envy, Flores Abunda - Lust, Fingimiento - Greed, Espectro Undervelt – Wrath and Devin Fortuno represents the sin of Sloth. I have tried to create some truly classic baddies with a modern twist that hopefully will stand the test of time. I think it's important for the reader to feel convinced that each villain really embodies their sin and also why the inhabitants of Zartarbia would be so terrified of them.

- **WHO IS YOUR FAVOURITE CHARACTER IN THE BOOK?**

I have to say I love Krock O'Dile, who is the roguish ringmaster of Le Cirque de Magique. He's a Fagin style character, naughty but not evil. He picks pockets, lies, gambles, smokes smelly cigars and drinks but equally he does have his redeeming features and he is an enormously flamboyant character. He is essentially very flawed but I think you find yourself overlooking a lot of his bad points because he is so charismatic.

- **HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE CHARACTER AND PLACE NAMES?**

I started by writing down key words such as demon or deceit and then putting them through a translation programme, say French, Spanish, German etc. I then picked out words I liked and formed various amalgamations.

- **ARE ANY OF THE CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?**

Absolutely. The books were written for my daughter Isabella and step daughter Lujzka, but as older characters because I figured by the time I finally finished writing the entire series they would be around the age of those within the books.

Obviously my Great Auntie Cis appears as herself and also Mrs. Plum who is based on a lovely lady called Jean who used to work at Raventhorpe (my great aunt's school).

Jet Black is based on a fantastic acrobat I met many years ago when I was working at Riverside Studios in London called James Thierre. He was actually Charlie Chaplin's grandson and Detective Valise was based loosely on his father who was a very surreal clown who used wacky suitcases as part of his act.

- **WHY DID YOU DECIDE ON YOUR TWO MAIN CHARACTERS BEING FEMALE, SURELY THAT ALIENATES A LARGE PART OF YOUR TARGET READERSHIP?**

I disagree, firstly there are plenty of strong male characters in the book and secondly this book was written for my daughter and stepdaughter who take the two central roles of Isabella and Lujzka. These books are not about gender role-playing, they are about characters that have flaws as well as their strong points. I have to say I don't agree with creating 'formula' male and female characters, these books are about individuals not point scoring between sexual stereotypes.

I have to say that plenty male friends of both myself and my husband Robert have read the book and loved it.

- **WHO DO YOU THINK YOUR BOOK APPEALS TO AND WHY?**

I would hope it appeals to a wide audience, obviously older children but also their parents and grandparents. Though it is essentially a children's book there are also plenty of ideas within the Zartarbia Tales that I believe will appeal to adults.

- **WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE A CHILDREN'S BOOK?**

Because I wanted to! Becoming a parent changes your perspective on everything.

I wanted to create something that Isabella and Lujzka would have for forever, something they could enjoy with their children and grandchildren. I also wanted to keep the memory of my Great Aunt Cis alive and for them to have some insight into what a fun person she was.

- **HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE INITIAL IDEAS?**

Well I've spent five years so far developing this project and because the 'baddies' of the story – The Syndicate – are based upon the seven deadly sins it made sense to write seven books. The way I tend to work is to plot all the story lines and characters before I begin to write the actual book. Most of the ideas come from actual people I have encountered, for example various children in the book are based upon personalities of children who have actually read the book in it's initial stages and given me a very blunt and honest feedback – which let's face it is the best way of improving any weakness in the plot.

- **WHY DID YOU DECIDE UPON SUCH A TRADITIONAL STYLE OF STORY TELLING WHEN CHILDREN NOWDAYS TEND TO HAVE SUCH SOPHISTICATED TASTES?**

I like the idea of a story that cannot be dated, that will appeal not just for this generation but also hopefully their children, grandchildren. I think that is why, for example, the Harry Potter series has been so successful, they capture a magic that is timeless, that don't depend on current trends or gimmicks but good, sound classic story telling.

- **IS IT NOT A LITTLE AMBITIOUS TO HAVE WORKED ON AN ENTIRE SERIES – DO YOU THINK A SERIES OF SEVEN BOOKS IS NECESSARY?**

Absolutely. I conceived the idea for seven books well over five years ago when I had just given birth to my daughter. The central core of 'baddies' collectively known as The Syndicate are based upon the seven deadly sins therefore it made sense to write seven books, one for each villain. Each story is fairly complex and aside from core characters there are also a lot of secondary one off characters, so I really felt it necessary not to cram too much into a smaller series of books but to focus on each battle against each Syndicate member.

- **WHO ARE YOUR PERSONAL INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATIONS?**

Films have always heavily influenced me. As a child the magic of 'The Wizard of Oz' was so tangible and I think endures to this day despite the fact that special effects have come on in leaps and bounds. Don't get me wrong I adore some of the fantastic films that have recently been made like The Grinch, Shrek, Finding Nemo and the Harry Potter films but equally there is a lot of drivel out there that depends on special effects as opposed to a strong storyline.

There are also references in the book that have been influenced by more adult material like Matrix Reloaded, Monty Python and Moulin Rouge.

When I was writing the first of the Zartarbia Tales I was very interested in the wonderful Cirque de Soleil - the characters and costumes are just superb. I was also heavily influenced by surrealism.

- **I SEE YOU HAVE A DEGREE IN ART AND FILM MAKING AS WELL AS WORKING ON A SERIES OF BOOKS - DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF MORE OF AN ARTIST OR A WRITER?**

Both. Each are very much things I have always felt I have to do.

- **WHAT COMES FIRST THE STORYLINES OR ILLUSTRATIONS?**

Though I carefully structure out the skeleton form of every book well in advance I would say usually the images. I find it easier to envisage the mannerisms and speech patterns of characters if I can look at them. I also have a huge sketchbook full of images cut out from magazines, ideas and notes – which are a constant point of reference. The other thing that I find helps as I am writing is to imagine which actors I would see playing the characters. For example Madonna would make a perfect Sectica and somebody like an aged Richard E Grant playing The Thinker.

- **WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK AS A CHILD?**

There are so many, but I tend to be drawn to good old-fashioned story telling.

I have always loved books like 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory', 'James and the Giant Peach', 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'The Chronicles of Narnia'.

I think the momentum and originality of these books permeate from one generation to the next generation

- **THERE ARE CERTAIN DARK ELEMENTS WITHIN THE STORY – DO YOU HAVE MUCH OF A DARK SIDE?**

If you look at any 'fairy story' you will see there are always good and bad elements. Disney has tended to sanitise the majority of traditional folklore but if you actually look back to the roots of these stories they are often very disturbing. For example there are well over 100 original versions of Cinderella, which stem from right across the globe and cover a range of very distressing and violent issues. The world is not a safe place and children are aware from an early age that life is full of danger more so now than ever. Whether it be the immediate threat of a bully at school, witnessing domestic violence at home, mental / physical / sexual abuse from somebody that is supposedly meant to be protecting a child, a worry about war or terrorism – all these things are unfortunately part of life whether we like it or not. Many of these issues crop up during the series of all seven books – not perhaps explicitly – but equally there is a strong message that these types of behaviour are not normal and are unacceptable. I don't pretend to be some moral crusader but damage in childhood whatever form it takes needs to be addressed. So I don't make any apology for any darker elements because that is life. The Zartarbia Tales are also very much about fighting for what you believe in and though we all want to believe that good will conquer over evil this doesn't always happen and it would be wrong to patronise children in pretending it did – but magic exists even if it is only in your imagination.

- **ARE YOU NOT JUST JUMPING ON THE HARRY POTTER BANDWAGON?**

No, there is no hidden agenda and aside from the target audience there are no similarities. JK Rowling is an absolute phenomena and an inspiration to all new writers, which actually makes it all the more surprising that publishing houses are not seeing the bigger picture with children's book writers.

- **DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS THE NEXT JK ROWLING?**

No. That would be a ridiculous comparison to make, flattering but ridiculous. No I see myself as the next Ana Fischel.

PERSONAL

- **SO YOU ARE MARRIED WITH A YOUNG DAUGHTER AND ALSO A STEP DAUGHTER – HOW HAVE YOU FOUND THIS ROLE?**

A challenge at first, not because we didn't like each other, but rather that she was a constant reminder of Robert's first marriage and I felt threatened at that time by his ex-wife. Now things are great, the difficulties that existed before have now been resolved and Lujzka knows how much I love her. I think divorce is a difficult thing for children to go through and they often find that their loyalties are split, especially when new partners or extended family come on the scene. What is lovely now is that Lujzka has two families that love her and I believe now have a healthy respect for each other's approach to her upbringing. Unfortunately earlier on this year Lujzka's grandfather tragically died. I think it made both sides of family realise that life is too short to hold grudges and that it's more beneficial all round to get on well. I have to say that though the two girls are very different in personality, they adore one another and I think we are a very strong as a family.

- **HOW DO YOU FIND BALANCING WORK WITH BEING A MOTHER?**

This is a question that most working parents agonise over, but I suppose that I am fairly lucky to be able to pick and choose my hours at the moment. Isabella is at a lovely Spanish school now but still you can't necessarily just stop work until she goes to bed. I am very fortunate that Robert is such a hands-on father to both of his daughters and he is also completely supportive of my work. It's impossible to be the perfect mother or father, we all have faults and there is no exact science as to what is always the best approach with your own children but I think Isabella is a happy, well rounded individual.

- **WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON YOUTH CULTURE TODAY?**

As a mother of a five year old daughter and a twelve year old step daughter I am very concerned by the fact children are encouraged to grow up before their time. Children are bombarded by extremely sexual images whether it be from pop stars or magazines which I find very disturbing. I think children should be allowed to enjoy their innocence, after all they'll be adults all too soon.

I am extremely protective of my family and I think in this day and age there is a lot more pressure on children, I don't think their imaginations are nurtured in the same way that they were say 20 years ago. One of the things I really notice living in Spain is how differently children are treated. Family is the focus of life and children are welcomed everywhere. Of course life is based outdoors a lot more because of the weather, so kids tend to be on the beach rather than in front of the television. Also a lot of time and energy goes into local festivals, fairs and competitions – things that include all age groups which is lovely.

LIVING IN SPAIN

- **WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO MOVE TO SPAIN?**

There were many reasons really but the main one was my husband Robert had been suffering with ill health. He had been a Queen's Council, which is a very pressurised profession to work in, and he collapsed in court one day. I think it was the wake up call we needed. Both of us had become disenchanted living in Britain, mostly the high cost of living and the terrible weather, so we decided we wanted to move to a warmer climate. Originally Robert wanted to move to France and I wanted to move to Italy, so as a compromise we decided to look at Spain. We started first, to explore Andalucia which I must say is extremely charming on the whole. Obviously the Costa del Sol it's self has a mixed reputation but we live just a short way from Marbella, where life is a little quieter and more Spanish. We were lucky to find a stunning river mill just 5 minutes drive to the beach, which is quite unusual and decided to buy it on the spot. Though nothing in life is ever 100% perfect we are very lucky and happy with our life here. Robert's health has fully recovered and the lifestyle is ideal for bringing up children.

- **SO HOW HAVE YOU SURVIVED FROM A WORK POINT OF VIEW?**

Well initially we decided to set up part of our house as a rural hotel, which has worked very well but from my point of view I found the lack of privacy difficult. We have done that for three years now and in affect we have decided to take a year out to do some refurbishments and concentrate on making the books successful. It has been a fascinating experience setting up a business in another country and we have met some wonderful people during this time.

- **SO WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU HAVE FOR SOMEBODY WANTING TO FIND THEIR 'PLACE IN THE SUN' SO TO SPEAK?**

Research is the key. Going on holiday somewhere and actually living and working in a place are two very separate things. Try to get referrals for reputable estate agents, look into finding good lawyers and spend time in the place you are considering not just during the summer but during the winter months too. For example to get to our house we have to cross a river which is fine when it's dry but two or three times a year the river isn't passable so in effect we are cut off. It is also essential to have some understanding of the language and culture if you want to be accepted by the local community.