



Damian Dibben interview

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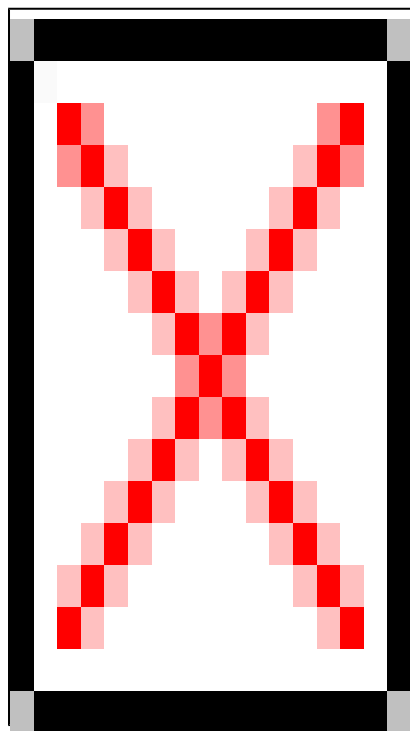
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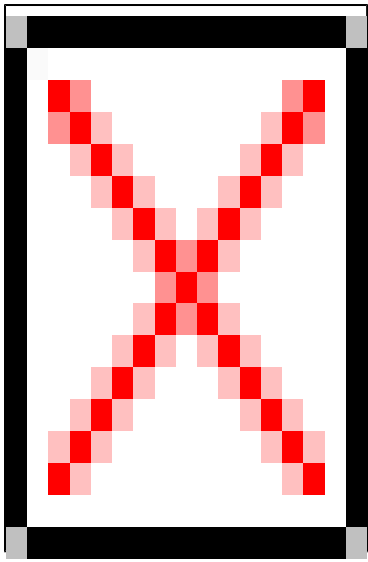
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Nick Tucker interviews the author of the **History Keepers** books

Author of the first three installments of **The History Keepers** series, launched in 2011 and already translated into 26 languages, Damian Dibben has been described by the **Observer** as 'one of the hottest properties in children's fiction today.' Coming to writing for children comparatively late, he previously worked as an actor and then screenwriter. The central plot of his series revolves around a select band of young History Keepers able to travel through time. Their mission is to protect the fabric of history as we know it against the machinations of an evil genius intent on re-writing the past to his own but no-one else's advantage.



Meeting [Damian](#) [3] in his fabulous flat on London's South Bank which he shares with his inseparable companion Dudley, a handsome Jack Russell terrier, I ask him first about the language he uses for characters living in the past. Is the time in historical fiction for the inclusion of the odd 'gadzooks' or 'eftsoons' in day-to-day speech now well and truly over?



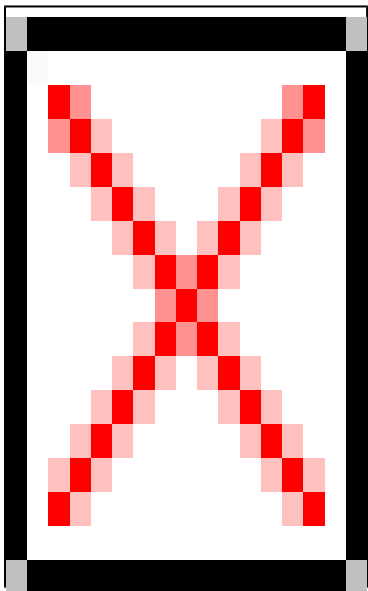
?Well, the first in the series, **The Storm Begins**, starts in the present which is where I wanted to anchor the books. After that, because my characters originate from different parts of the world I have tended to reflect where they come from geographically in the way that they speak. But I have also tried to avoid obvious modernisms in their dialogue.?

But how do you explain the fact that everyone else is able to speak and understand English wherever the Seekers choose to go?

?It can be a problem. But because English is now almost a universal European language, just as Latin was centuries ago, my main characters are all allowed to speak it fluently. And because their enemies are actually related to them, it seems logical that they should speak in English too.?

Their first main enemy Zeldt is described by you as ?pure evil.? Is this something you believe in yourself?

?I do believe it exists, and I have definitely created characters who possess no redeeming features. In **Nightship to**



China, for example, there is a villain who seems addicted not just to anarchy but also to inflicting pain.?

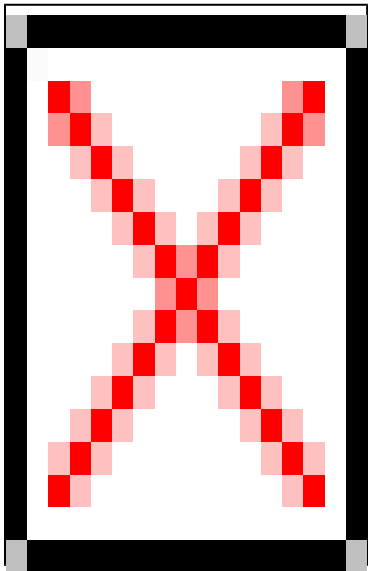
How graphic should you be here? There is one moment, in **The Storm Breaks**, for example, when you describe a villain stabbing someone in the arm and making sure that they skewer the sinew as well.

?I am to a certain extent led by my publishers on this. I occasionally ask them whether some details may be too much for a younger age-group, but they have never so far said no. And the age group itself changes from country to country. In Britain I write for an early teenage market, but in Germany my books are published for adults. In general there does seem to be a taste for violence among today?s young readers. But with me it?s all rather James Bond ? villains with a pinch of salt. Not exactly the stuff of nightmares, I hope.?

Is the actual job of writing for you a joy or a chore? Or perhaps a bit of both?

?The coming up with ideas and the research involved is something I absolutely love. It will start off as one thing in my brain and then grow over the next week until it is almost totally formed. While this is happening I usually can't sleep. For research, I often go to kids' books first to get the facts right before going on to more detailed work, often involving quite a lot of travel.?

For **Nightship to China** Damian followed in the footsteps of Marco Polo to Hong Kong, proceeded to the Canton province and the Guilin mountain range before finishing up in Beijing. For his previous novel, **Circus Maximus**, he lived for a while in an apartment in Rome overlooking the Trevi fountain. Does he really need so much research for stories that are primarily fantasies?



?The main thing for me is to make sure that readers can feel what it may actually have been like to arrive in sixteenth century Venice or whatever else I am describing. What people would be eating or wearing, in particular. This side of writing comes easily to me as I have always loved food myself and remain very intrigued by clothes, given that I was once a scenic and costume designer in the film world. But I also like getting across what the climate would be like, in fact the whole feel of a place in the past. It's not to do with wanting all the facts to be right, though I think that's quite a nice bi-product, but more that if you want to provide escapism, which is after all what my stories are about, you have to make everything properly convincing first.?

In fact, Damian is being a bit hard on himself here. His novels so far have also delved into genuine historical issues including the birth of world trade, relations between East and West, wealth and multi-culturalism in Shakespeare's London and the inventiveness of China with regards to money, printing and navigation. This reflects the way he has always been fascinated by history, or as he says himself, 'by its epic sweep, by its colour and darkness, by its incredible characters, its many heroes and villains.' As a child brought up in London he visited museums every weekend, fascinated by stories of what people have achieved in the past. He is now a patron of the charity [Kids in Museums](#) [4]. But despite all this learning, has he ever been tempted to let his time travelling characters fail in their attempt to keep history as it always was, so allowing one of those what-if situations to arise in his fiction?

?My original idea was that the Seekers would ultimately fail in their mission and that history would therefore be changed. But in the end I thought I would avoid going down that particular road, which has already been taken numbers of other writers. I still think about doing this sometimes, but more perhaps as a conclusion to the series rather than something that happens in the middle.?

Meanwhile, is your fourteen-year old hero Jake Djones ever going to get older and want perhaps a bit more from some of the girls he meets on his time travels?

?He does get older, fifteen by the third book, and yes, the adult side of things is increasingly in the air for him. But it hasn't really led to anything definite happening yet.?

What about the movie right to your books now purchased by the company **Working Title**? Any progress there?

?There have been two draughts for a screenplay now, and progress is being maintained, though I know from having worked on the inside how long this process can take.?

It's now time leave to leave Damian to get on with his writing ? in a good week he reckons to produce at least 6000 words. His prose style is more traditional than experimental, describing characters' thought, feelings and what they can see with the help of numerous adjectives and adverbs. Coming from writing screenplays with their emphasis on immediate understanding, or as he puts it 'show not tell', he has always believed in packing in as much information for the reader as possible. 'Because I see everything so incredibly clearly in my own mind's eye, I just want everyone else to be able to experience what I am experiencing.?'

Many other good writers of historical fiction for children exist these days. But Damian has the gift of instant popularity while never writing down to his audience when it comes to describing historical periods and events. Another book is on the horizon, this time going in a quite different direction. Still only in early middle-age, there is clearly much more to come from this author who never gives less than his best.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

The History Keepers: Nightship to China, Damien Dibben, Corgi Children's Books, 432pp, 978-0552564304, £7.99

The History Keepers: The Storm Begins, 496pp, 978-0552564137, £6.99

The History Keepers: Circus Maximus, 480pp, 978-0552564298, £6.99

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