

BOOKS: Shadowmancer Hotter than Potter?_61404

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Anglican priest Graham Taylor sold off his beloved Harley Davidson to self-publish his novel "Shadowmancer"-which went on to become an international bestseller. (Photo courtesy G.P. Putnam's Sons.)

BOOKS: Shadowmancer Hotter than Potter?

By Bob Smietana

Religion News Service

CLOUGHTON, England (RNS)-When he was 21, Graham Taylor woke up in his London flat after a night of heavy partying, looked in a mirror, and said, "Oh, God, there has got to be more to life than this."

Taylor didn't expect God to answer. But a voice inside told Taylor to make peace with his parents, whom he had hardly seen since running away at 16.

“Go home,” the voice said, “and I'll find you a job and I'll find you a wife.”

“I'll tell you—I didn't want the job in my hometown, and I didn't want the wife,” Taylor said in an interview from his home in Cloughton, where he's now the local vicar. “That was off the agenda.”

But within a few days, Taylor had packed his bags and headed home, where to his surprise he found a job, and a wife, in short order. He also found a calling as an Anglican priest, a career he started after working his way through school for 10 years as a police officer.

And then came the surprise of his life. Last summer, at age 43, Taylor became one of his country's best-selling authors. His novel “Shadowmancer,” about an 18th century evil cleric who tries to take over the world, topped the United Kingdom's best-seller list 15 weeks and sold more than 300,000 copies—despite being released at the same time as the latest Harry Potter book.

“Shadowmancer,” which also has become a best seller in Spain, Argentina, Poland and Greece, debuted in the United States with a 250,000-copy first printing. Taylor arrived in the States in early May for a publicity tour that included an appearance on the “Today” show.

The book was so popular it spawned a new trend dubbed “Shadowmania” by newspapers and is advertised as being “hotter than Potter.”

Taylor says the success of his book—the film rights recently sold for \$4 million—is “unreal.”



“I am here by complete accident,” he says. “I am a storyteller. I tell stories in my sermons, and this big accident has been arranged (for the book) to suddenly become an international best seller. And I sit back and chuckle.”

Taylor wrote the novel on a lark. A woman had challenged him to do it after a speech he gave about occult themes in children's books like Harry Potter and the works of Philip Pulman. Pulman-whose "Dark Materials" reworks Milton's "Paradise Lost" so that Satan is a hero-particularly bothered Taylor.

"Pulman says that God is dead, that God is a liar, God is a cheat, God is senile. Well, that really offended me," Taylor says. He set out to write a fantasy novel that would be exciting and scary and show a God who was active in the world.

Since he didn't think anyone would publish his novel, Taylor sold off his beloved Harley-Davidson motorcycle to pay the 3,000 pounds to have it self-published. One of the original 500 copies made its way to Faber and Faber publishers, who bought the U.K. rights. It's being published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in the United States.

Set in 18th century Yorkshire, the book pits three teenagers-Thomas Barrick, Cate Coglan and an Ethiopian boy named Raphah-against Obadiah Demurral, the vicar of Whitby. Demurral is a shadowmancer-a sorcerer who talks to the dead-who keeps the body of a dead girl in his church and summons her to foretell the future.

Not content with the wealth he's accumulated from oppressing local peasants, Demurral sets his sights on overthrowing God. He steals part of the Ark of the Covenant and uses it to summon the devil, named Pyratheon, to Earth.

Raphah's family has been the keeper of the Ark of the Covenant for centuries, and he tries to retrieve it with the help of Thomas, Cate and a local smuggler named Jacob Crane. Taylor describes their adventures as "Robert Louis Stevenson tinged with J.R.R. Tolkein and with C.S. Lewis."

He based Demurral, who is completely corrupted, on some of the criminals

he met as a police officer.

"I met people who were like that, who were evil," he said. "Thankfully, they were few and far between-but when you met them, there was this sense of evil. I was always amazed at how many people started off in quite a good place and then through circumstances and will and sin and all those sorts of things, they ended up committing these horrendous crimes."

"Shadowmancer's" fast-paced plot features a number of fight scenes, also based on some of Taylor's experiences as a police officer in rural Yorkshire. Taylor, who describes himself as a "lumbering Yorkshireman"-about 6 feet tall, and 6 feet wide-said he often "flew by the seat of my pants as a cop, with no backup."

Most times it went well. One night, things went bad when he arrested a young man for breaking a shop window. The man's friends-30 or so of them-came out of the pub just as Taylor was putting the man in his police car. Fueled on "drug and drink," they attacked Taylor. As he was getting nearly beaten to death, the man he had arrested kicked out the window of the police car and yelled out, "Where's your God now, Graham?"

"God was there," says Taylor. "God was there with me. If I had died-if I had been murdered- then I would have gone straight to be with God because I am a Christian. I survived, so I believe that God protected me. Though either way, as a Christian, I win. It's that win-win situation. In our suffering, God is with us."

That sense of God being with him sustained him through some heart trouble and a case of pneumonia earlier this year. He's decided to give up his parish this fall and work as a locum, or interim minister, while spending more time speaking and writing.

While he hasn't yet replaced his Harley, Taylor's publicity pictures show him in the church graveyard in Cloughton, wearing his leather motorcycle

jacket. He says he's just doing what he thinks Jesus would do if he showed up today.

"If Jesus was alive today, he wouldn't walk, he'd ride a Harley," Taylor says. "There you are in a town, and 12 guys turn up on Harleys. They take off their helmets and they all have got long hair, and then they start healing people—you are going to attract a really big crowd."

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