

Q: Who or what was your greatest influence in deciding to become a writer?

A: First, my mother. Second, my sister. Third, all the great teachers I've had in my life.

Q: Twenty-seven books published for adults. Over 110 million copies in print worldwide. What inspired you to try something new in a book for a younger audience?

A: I grew up reading fantasy but had never really attempted it as a writer. Then an idea for a character hit me — Vega Jane. I really thought I knew her intimately, as though she had strode fully formed into my head one day. All I needed was a story in which to place her. And it finally came. But with that said, as the story progressed, I learned things about Vega Jane that I didn't know when we first met.

Q: You and your agent submitted *The Finisher* in a very unconventional way. Can you tell us a little about that (including where your nom de plume came from)?

A: I submitted the manuscript under a pseudonym. I wanted people to love the book without knowing I was the writer. I used the name Janus Pope. Janus is the Roman god of two faces, one looking forward, the other back. I thought it appropriate for someone hiding his real identity. The Pope part came from my family being Catholic. Sometimes, it's as simple as that.

Q: When you began thinking about Vega Jane and her world, did you know then that the story would be a fantasy?

A: Absolutely. She was going to inhabit a world that was different from ours. That was one reason to do the story: to free myself from real-world restrictions. I just wanted to let my imagination run.

Q: Can you tell us a little about the differences between writing *The Finisher* and writing one of your novels for an older audience — was it very different, or is storytelling the same no matter the audience or genre?

A: Storytelling is, in many respects, the same, whether you're writing for adults or a younger audience. They want atmosphere, authentic dialogue, and characters to root for or against. They also want compelling plots and surprises and danger for folks they've come to care about. With that said, it is different writing for a younger audience on certain levels. I never write down to kids; they're far too smart for that. But you have to be aware that certain subtleties or nuances might escape them because of their more limited life experiences. And they also might lack context to see a line or situation as satirical. After all, satire cannot live without a foundation of knowledge against which to place it. But I never consciously think about writing for a particular audience, age or otherwise. If you take care of the story, most other things fall into place.

Q: What were some of your favorite fantasy and science fiction stories growing up? Did any find their way into *The Finisher*?

A: As a child I loved stories where animals were like humans. They could talk like we could, dress like we did, and run into the problems that human have to face and solve. The first book I ever remember reading was *The Magic Squirrel*, which couldn't get more fantastical. I was also a devoted fan of Tolkien, Lewis Carroll, C.S. Lewis, H.G. Wells, and Jules Verne. What kid wouldn't eat that stuff up? And each of these writers envisioned new worlds and piled detail upon detail on this stunningly new landscape until you just accept it as real. That's what I tried to do in *The Finisher*.

Q: What kind of research did you do for this novel?

A: I re-read a lot of my favorite fantasies, including more contemporary ones like *Harry Potter* and Jasper Fforde's wonderful concoctions. I devoured book after book on mythology, religion, and ancient worlds, both to learn from them and also to put me in the mood to create my own particular universe. I researched slang and old English so I could put my own mark on the language that my characters would use.

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Q: Do any of the terms and names you created for this story have outside influences, either real or fictional?

A: Absolutely. Let's start with names. Vega is the name of the star that is the brightest star in the Lyra Constellation and the fifth brightest in the heavens. It's also the star, for various reasons, that has been researched and written about more than any other. Thansius is a derivation of Athanasius, a bishop who lived around AD 330 and used the Book of Revelation in his attacks on other clerics. Folks weren't sure whether he was a good or bad person. I like my characters to be on the fence. Morigone is the Celtic goddess of war and magic. The Peckwater Quadrangle, named after Ronald Peckwater, draws certain influence from Tolkien. Duk Dodgson comes from Lewis Carroll. Duckworth was the name of his best friend, and Dodgson, of course, was Carroll's real surname. A "cobble" has a basis in mythology, though it's not called a "cobble." But since it's three creatures tied together, the term *cobble* literally leapt out at me, as in "cobbled together." Eon is a term inextricably linked to time. Even little Dis Fidus has meaning — his name has mythological ties to a godlike keeper of oaths. The Dabbat is a gigantic serpent from Islamic mythology. Well, jabbit made far more sense to me (*jab* and *bit* — so snakelike), so I created that name instead. Pretty much every character name and many of the creatures and terms used have ties to mythology, classic literature, or religious touchstone. I smiled sometimes when I would concoct a combination of names with only my knowing their origins. I think readers will have a blast trying to figure them out.

Q: Do any of the characters in *The Finisher* resemble you now?

A: Thansius, who's seen something of the world and likes to dispense that knowledge in the form of advice. But there's still a strong element of Vega Jane in me. Defiant of authority, wondering why things are the way they are. Always questioning things. Probably one reason I became a lawyer.

Q: What do you hope readers are pondering as they turn the last page?

A: Will they make it? That tells me I've done my job as a writer — making a reader worry about Wugs who aren't even real.

Q: Finally — we have to ask— can you give us a hint about what might happen next to Vega Jane?

A: The Quag. It's not just full of beasts. There are other things in there. Oh, yes, there are. And as fanciful as Wormwood is, you haven't seen anything yet, dear reader!

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