

TLC Showcase

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Introduction

I wrote the first words of my debut novel, *The Boy a Thousand Years Wide* almost three years ago, but the truth is it was born long before that. I was mesmerised by *Paradise Lost* as a seventeen year old lad studying for his A-levels. The themes of conflict in Heaven resonated and I wondered how this might play out in the future and what impact it might have upon mankind. It was an idea that stuck with me, like a dormant volcano biding its time.

All I needed to do was write it...

And so I did. Slowly at first, snatching hours here and there, thinking about characters and plot on the train to work. I wondered about narrative arcs in the gym, pondering what Baxter would do in between my bench presses. I observed the way friends interacted with each other, how they talked, what body language they used. Things started to take shape.

But as I was writing and observing, I was also thinking. Thinking about how I wanted to tell my story. I wanted it to be accessible not stuffy and old fashioned. It had to be fun and exciting, an adventure in every sense of the word. I wanted battles and danger, with characters as colourful as a Peacock's feathers. And after a long while I did it. I wrote my first book.

But then I asked myself another question. Is it any good?

So I took the next logical step. I asked friends and family to read it. But they only told me what they thought I wanted to hear. They didn't tell me what I needed to hear. Then TLC entered my life.

I sent my MS to Jane Adams. With the simple question...is it any good? Encouragingly the first words I got back went some way to answering my question.

"To respond, first, to your major query. No, this isn't rubbish and yes you can write."

But before I went and high-fived myself in the mirror, I read on.

“For a first novel, you seem to have an impressive grasp on narrative structure and characterisation. You’ve also taken a successful risk in the non-standard way you’ve written this...however, there are problems, but I’d be utterly amazed if that were not the case.”

Jane highlighted in great detail what was good and what needed working on. Something my friends could never have done. She created an obtainable framework for improvement which inspired me further still. Then I went away, digested all the information TLC had given me and worked on my edits.

I took my time.

Winter turned to spring, spring turned to summer. Edits were made, prose re-shaped, dialogues altered. Then I stopped. I left my writing and went on holiday.

When I came back to it I was rested and refreshed. I checked it one last time and sent it back. I will find out shortly what Jane thinks of it.

I have discovered that TLC isn’t just about the editorial reports. They offer much more than that. They encourage, advise and support. But above all, they believe. They believe in me as a writer.

Extract from Chapter 4 of *The Boy a Thousand Years Wide*

Images flicker 'gainst the back of my eyes, twisting through my mind. Brotherhood. Reapers. Trent. Mary. I see Fagan, cigarette dangling from her mouth, palms outstretched. She keeps saying the same thing over an' over.

"Borough ain't safe fer yer no more...yer gotta leave...an' quickly."

Her hands, the tattoos on her hands. Glowing brighter an' brighter. Blinding me. I hear voices talking.

"D'yer think he's the one?" a voice says, "The Michael Son?"

It sounds like Trent.

"If he lives" another voice says, "who knows."

More images crash through my mind. Scenes of angels fighting, their blades clashing, screaming an' shouting, falling through the stars towards the earth. Trails of stardust hang like threads behind 'em.

A cold breeze blows over my face. Then something warm an' wet, stinking of damp hair. I open my eyes, slowly, one at a time. Focus.

"Ugghh!" I shouts, "gits offa me!"

A furry face cocks its head 'bove me an' whimpers.

"Alfie git!" a voice says.

"Baxter, y'all ok?"

It's Trent. He's wearing a cut lip an' a black eye.

My body aches, like it's been broken into pieces an' stuck back together all wrong.

I try an' move, sit up but I can't. The pain won't let me. I grimace, breathe deep.

Rest.

"Yer had us worried kid" a voice says, "We didn't think yer'd make it. Reapers almost had yer. It's a miracle y'all still in one piece, let alone alive."

A hazy figger unleans itself from a doorframe. I blink at it. Its face blurs into focus an' it's as if the world jes' shuddered to a halt.

It's the stranger from the Ol' Mill House.

I jolt upright. My head pounding like a jackhammer. But my hands. Something's wrong wit' my hands. A stinging pain in my palms, like they're on fire. I lift 'em up to my face. Bandages wrap 'round 'em, hiding 'em from me. I try an' get to my feet but two great arms hold me steady like a vice.

"Yer in no state kid" the stranger says.

I feel dizzy, faint. I don't move. Jes' close my eyes an' let the room spin 'round me.

My mouth feels like cardboard, as if I've been chewing on dirt. I rub my throat, swallow. I can't remember the last time I ate or drank.

"Drink" he says, holding a water skin to my mouth.

I refuse.

"Christsakes kid yer gotta drink" he says.

So I do. Fresh. Ice cold. Radiant water. Feels like its bringing me back to life.

I try moving my toes, my fingers. Remember how they all work. But they don't seem too innerested. Bruises mask my skin like an egg-plant. Never thought I'd be fighting Reapers though. Never in a million years.

"My hands" I mutters.

I pick a bit of dirty bandage loose. Keep pulling at it 'til I see skin.

I stop. Dead.

"I took the liberty while y'all were resting, seemed as good a time as any" the stranger says kinda sheepish.

A bloodied triangle wit' an eye in the middle stares back at me. The same as Fagan. I cover it back up. Choke on my breath.

He takes my hand, wraps the bandage back 'round tight.

"Best leave 'em on fer now kid" he says. "Name's Milton an' yer already met my protege over there." He nods his head over at Trent.

Trent grins an' waves. The same marking on his hand, same as Milton. Same as me.

"Protégé?" I whisper.

I hold my head in my hands, rub my eyes.

"Student if yer will" Milton grins.

"That makes y'all a teacher?" I ask.

Milton scratches his beard.

"More a master" he ponders.

I shrug, try an' sit upright, but I ain't got the strength.

"So yer Milton..." I mumble, staring at the bandages on my hands.

"Alfie! Go on git!" Milton says.

Alfie don't take no notice, jes' jumps up an' drools all over me, his tail going like the clappers. He looks more wolf than hound. Thick silvery coat an' sharp looking teeth.

"Not ev'ryone's as happy to see yer as y'all are 'em" Milton says shoving him offa me.

Alfie whimpers like he's feelings been hurt, one ear cocks low to the ground.

"Damn dog don't know his own strength."

"That's 'coz yer spoil him" Trent says.

"Do not."

"Do too."

The hut's small but cosy. Stumps of timber an' bits of log gorge into ev'ry corner. A fire hisses an' pops, glowing shades of amber. Above it an old battered kettle hangs as wisps of steam twirl towards the ceiling. Baskets of damp herbs sit on a table. Cracked stewing pots hang 'bove the hearth, beds drape in furs an' a stags head fixes 'gainst the wall.

"Yer safe here kid. Reapers don't cross water" Milton says, "They hates the water."

"Reapers..." I mutter.

I rub my eyes, try an' focus on Milton an' Trent.

Then I notice it.

Something's missing.

"Where's Mary?" I says.

Alfie starts barking. Big booming barks. His tail wagging.

"Not now Alfie" Milton says.

He puts a finger to his mouth an' hushes the great hound.

"Where's Mary?"

Milton stares at Trent then at me. They look worried. Seems like an age before he answers.

"Don't yer remember?"

"W'udn't be asking if I did" I says.

"Brotherhood took her" Milton says.

A slicing pain rips me open. Slices further wit' ev'ry breath. I hold myself, like I'm stopping my guts from spilling out onto the floor. I can see Milton talking, but he don't say nothing. Nothing I can hear. I lean over an' vomit. Wipe my hand 'cross my mouth.

I feel nothing. Jes' a numbness. Like a black hole's sucking up my insides.

I let go, breathe. Big gulping lungfuls of air. One after the other. Inhale. Exhale.

Trent stands in front of me. He stares at me. Not saying a word. Then he grabs me by the arms, shakes me hard.

"Baxter...Baxter" his voice surrounds me.

"What?"

"She's dead."

"She ain't dead."

"The Brotherhood took her..."

"She ain't dead."

"Look kid I didn't wanna be the one to tell yer but..." Milton says.

"SHE AIN'T DEAD!!" I scream, "YER HEAR ME? SHE AIN'T FUCKEN DEAD!!"

My eye's bulge. Veins pop inside my head. I can't stop. Blood bubbles inside me. My twin flickers. A rage takes me. My brother's voice echoes in my head.

"Y'all promised yer'd look after her."

"I said I'd look after her!"

"Baxter yer promised me."

Trent slaps me hard 'cross the face. I stop.

"Yer sh'ud gits some rest kid. Tomorrow's gonna be a long day" Milton says.

Sleep escapes me.

Ev'ry time I close my eyes I see her. Hair an' dirt cling to her face, bare feet leaving bloody footprints in the snow. Hands outstretch, tears drop. She gits closer, her mouth opens an' opens an' opens. Her eyes flame red. She stops, cocks her head, sniffs the air an' screams.

I will save yer Mary. I promise I will.

I wake from a broken rest an' fumble naked out of bed. I breathe in, stretch, lean back an' pull my hands behind my head. I breathe out, bones click an' muscles ache. An' icy breeze claws its way through the hut, prickling up my skin. I shiver. Look fer some clothes. At the end of the bed lie a folded shirt, breeches an' a thick grey coat. A sturdy set of worn boots sit under a wooden stool. I put 'em on an' step outside into a daydream.

Dusk's falling, bleeding a copper haze 'cross the sky. The endless whisper of veiled insects sways in the air. A line of chickens cluck passed, pecking at the frostbitten ground as they go. Two hefty looking mustangs chew on patches of frostgrass close to a small crop of trees. They look at me outta the corners of their eyes, their tails rustling, not breaking from their meal. Probably wondering who the Hell I am.

It's the first grass I seen since I can't remember. Green shoots pierce the white

surroundings like leafy daggers. A bone ragged scarecrow hangs limply 'bove, strapped to stakes of wood an' impaled into the frosted ground. Snow an' ice thaw out in patches 'cross the valley floor. Tree lined hills gently rise either side of me an' a stream meanders down amongst 'em, murmuring an' dancing right past the hut an' off into the distance. It's beautiful. Jes' like one of Ma's bedtime stories.

My nose twitches. I smell meat cooking, rabbit I think. My mouth waters, reminding me I ain't eaten in days. The fire inside the hut's still burning, a battered old pot swings gently 'bove it. A dead rabbit lays half skinned on a table. A headless bird plucked dry. I hear nothing but the gentle murmur of water 'crossing rocks. I ain't ever known something so quiet an' peaceful. Almost don't seem right, like I'm the only living thing in the valley. As if it was created jes' fer me.

I heard of places like this. Places where the snows don't come. Places of purity an' nature. Jes' never counted on seeing it. A tear trickles down my face. Mary was right. We w'ud have been happy here.

I walk slowly out onto the porch, past a wooden chair that's rocking gently in the breeze. I try an' take it all in, but it's too much. I'd need a hunnered pairs o' eyes to see it all. Sunlight picks out ev'ry leaf an' shade of grass, ev'ry sparkle of water. I splash into the stream an' feel the cold water pinching at my feet. I kneel down an' hold my head unner. Spread my fingers through the silt an' stones. Freezing. I gulp down mouthfuls of fresh water. Splash it over my chest an' arms. It's the cleanest I been since the day I was born.

I pull myself up to my feet an' rub my face.

"So I see yer feeling better then" a voice says.

I brush the water from my eyes an' shield 'em from the sinking sun. It's Milton.

I feel like I been caught stealing. That I sh'udn't be standing in his stream. Guilty.

Alfie splashes towards me, his tongue hanging out an' his tail wagging. His thick silver coat shines as water rolls right offa it. Milton strides towards me, two dead Rabbits

in one hand, a chipped wateringbucket in the other. Arras slung over his shoulder an' a blade tucked into his weathered trousers. He ain't much better dressed than me. Thick black coat an' a grey scarf hanging loosely 'bout his neck. But least he's clean. The last drops of water pour outta my hair, down my spine an' back where they came.

I gits a good look at him. He's lean, rugged looking. Unshaven. Thick dark shoulder length hair. Tattoos swirl up the sides of his neck. Twinkling at me. His eyes are small but keen. Like the deep blue sea. His face toughened by age. A crooked smile creaks open.

"They fit ok kid?" he asks.

He steps closer. The water laps from the buckets edge an' dribbles down his breeches.

I look at my coat an' trousers. Nod my head.

"I knew they'd fit yer jes' fine" he smiles.

I step outta the stream, look 'round at the valley.

"Where am I?"

"My place" he says.

About the writer

As far as writing is a journey then so too is my life. They say life can sometimes imitate art, so when Baxter Wright, the hero of my story, battles forces that would bring about the destruction of mankind, I take comfort in the fact that I only work in advertising to keep a roof over my head.

Advertising is what you might call a 'lively' profession. I've met plenty of characters along the way, some good, some ugly and some very, very bad. A few of them can be found living and breathing inside the pages of my first book, *The Boy a Thousand Years Wide*. Who knows, one day they might get a chance to read it and wonder if the similarly psychotic tendencies of Moloch, the story's antagonist, were based upon their own behaviours all those years ago.

