

# First images are all important ...for Cliff McNish



"I am more interested in plot and character than simply words. If I had to concern myself with words alone then I would fail to write anything. I know it's time to stop redrafting my stories when I realise that the changes I am struggling with are so minor that no reader will ever notice."

These were the opening comments from Cliff McNish when I invited him to talk about his work. Cliff disturbed children's consciousness with *Doomspell* in 2000 – the first book of a highly successful trilogy. But how did it come about?

Cliff and his partner had split up and he desperately wanted to spend more time with his young daughter. He loved sharing bedtime stories with her and wanted to go on nourishing her love of stories and reading. He decided to write something for her. At their next meeting he asked for ideas about a story 'just for her.' He was surprised by the prompt response. Cliff had always entertained her with funny, made-up tales and yet Rachel's answer was "I want a story with an evil witch in it. I want her to stay evil to the very end – not a witch that becomes good! I want to be in the story too, with my best friend, Sandra. A dragon would be good as well."

Taken aback by this Cliff began considering plots to involve these characters. He admitted that he hadn't penned a story since his schooldays and he realised it was going to be a huge challenge. He started to imagine an opening scene, and, once he had started, the story fell effortlessly into place. But the story got longer and longer, and it became difficult to stop.

When Rachel first saw the manuscript she loved it and shared it with family and friends. "Get it published!" was a frequent suggestion. "I didn't know anything about book publishing. My background was working-class where books were a rarity, but I did have an acquaintance in Cambridge and I met up with her to ask for advice." She was initially complimentary about the project, but when pressed she tore it to shreds. Thoroughly downcast he swept the manuscript aside – for about three weeks – then he began to have second thoughts about her comments. *There wasn't enough pace. The funny characters lacked real wit. The story wasn't dark enough.* Although she had emphasised that dark writing was his strength Cliff took the criticism to heart and completely rewrote the story.

"I cut out a lot of the humour and developed the dark side. The last thing to go was Rachel's friend, Sandra. Rachel accepted this but only when I transferred Sandra's magical powers to her!" After a long search he found an agent who was willing to take it on. She requested the first three chapters. Six months later she asked for the completed manuscript. This time the response was quicker and she soon found him a home at Orion, who were looking for new fantasy writers. It was his editor there who persuaded him that there was more than one book in his story.

Each of the books in his *Silver Sequence* stands alone as outstanding fantasy novels for a wide readership. Colourful

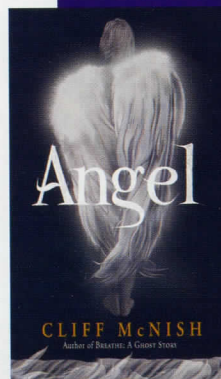
and compelling language build exciting and chilling atmospheres by turn, concluding with a tremendous climax. Claustrophobic intensity abounds again in his ghost novel *Breathe*. "My wife wanted me to write a proper, really scary story as I was always writing frightening fantasy genre. I knew from talking to children that most of my young readers like to be scared and I had this image in my head of a girl looking out of a window. I didn't know anything else about her, but I felt there was a story to tell." Lots of research was necessary for this book. There was a mass of historical background to be checked – "How much did it cost to bury a child in the early 1820s?" – and it developed into a story about the redemptive power of love.

So how did his latest creation, *Angel*, come about? Cliff was brought up within a Catholic family and was very aware of seeing stone angels in church from an early age. In its original conception this book begins with a girl getting up in a dark bedroom before going downstairs for a glass of water. She returns and crawls back into bed. As she drops off to sleep a bright line shines down on her and becomes brighter and brighter until she wakes up. "I saw this light manifest itself into an angel, complete with wings, halo and a beautiful face." At this point Cliff started to ask himself questions about the girl. Was she really what she seemed? What if she was an angel herself? Or, more interestingly still, what if she was half human and half angel living between and betwixt these two worlds? So what would happen if the girl was real but became an angel too? What would be the boundaries between an angelic and a human world? Cliff didn't want his characters to be typically religious angels, obeying the will of God. This has been done too often. He feels secular angels, free to make their own choices just as we do, and having to live with the consequences of those choices, would be more demanding to explore. So he created angels that have to make real, moral choices. A fascinating read for children who enjoy being challenged.

And what's next from this extraordinarily imaginative writer? Another dark fantasy tale, but shorter than previous works. Cliff has created beings and atmosphere rather than a whole fantasy world. He's about to start the redrafting process for this story involving a boy standing outside a house, teaching a dog how to walk. That first, all-important image.

David Blanch

These titles, all written by Cliff McNish, are published by Orion Children's Books



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