



Joseph Delaney

The Last Apprentice: Revenge of the Witch (Book 1)
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The Last Apprentice Q&A with Joseph Delaney

How long does it take you to write a book? About a year—four months for the first draft and then the remaining months reworking it with my editor. The first book took longer, because it grew slowly from a short book of 10,000 words to one of 35,000, and then finally 60,000. **How many books will there be in the series?** It was always going to be a series of at least three books. Now, as I'm writing Book Five, I'm starting to get ideas for the sixth. That probably won't be the final one, though. The first three books cover just one year of Tom's life. The apprenticeship should last five years (if he survives!), so that makes fifteen books in all. But the series will end when I tire of it. If it came to the point where I no longer enjoyed writing, it would show in the writing and storytelling, and Tom's adventures would be over. **Which authors have been your biggest inspiration?** Tolkien and Frank Herbert (author of the *Dune* series). I've always read lots of fantasy and science fiction. Also, folktales from Lancashire—the area where I live in England—have been a help. My very first version of *Revenge of the Witch* featured a version of a folktale called "The Schoolmaster of Cockerham," but I dropped that. The tales are there in the background, maybe helping to give atmosphere to the book. **What research do you carry out for the *Last Apprentice* series?** Very little for the first book, because most of it was there in my head already and I knew the places involved. Now, with later books in the series, I do some research. I visited an area with stone graves for *Curse of the Bane*. For Book Five (which I'm writing now), I need to find out a little about the history of canals and water mills. It's not history, though, and I'll change the geography of a location if necessary. The plots are more important, so I always add and invent when necessary. **How important are dreams as inspiration for your books?** Very important. The test in *Revenge of the Witch*, when Tom is left alone in a haunted house, came from a recurrent nightmare I had as a child. I also get ideas while I'm watching television or a movie. Sometimes ideas will occur to me when I'm in the shower or walking. I keep a notebook and jot things down as soon as possible, so I don't forget them.

But the series draws upon other sources, including my knowledge of local geography, interest in folktales, and my own imagination. I keep a notebook and keep building up ideas. I'm working within a genre, so I use its conventions but try to add to the repertoire if I can. **You began by trying to get published as a writer of books for adults. What made you want to change to children's fiction?** It was my agent's idea: I wanted to be the next Tolkien but was getting nowhere. She suggested I try writing for children, and it proved to be a correct decision. I now prefer writing for children, because they are really enthusiastic and you can meet your readership in large numbers and promote your work by visits to schools and libraries. **What's your usual routine for writing the books?** I always start each writing session by reading and revising what I did the previous day. I used to write from 6:15 to 7:30 each morning, before going to work. Now I write each day when the mood strikes me. I aim to write 5,000 words a week, but more than half of that can be written in one day if it's going well. I now work in my study, typing straight into my computer, but it's not that important where I do my writing. I could write anywhere as long as it's quiet and I'm in the mood. **When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?** In my early twenties. It's taken a long time to get published, but I kept giving up and doing other things such as teaching, which took away all my time and energy. I taught for almost thirty years, first as an English teacher, then later as the head of film and media studies, teaching sixteen to eighteen-year-olds. **What are your favorite books from your own childhood?** *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson—the first novel I ever read. Also lots of fiction and nonfiction about space exploration. **Does having children and grandchildren of your own help with your writing?** My two sons both want to be writers. I once tried to co-write a book with the younger one, but it didn't work out. Maybe we'll try again one day. My older grandchildren give some feedback, which helps. **The Spook warns, "Never trust a woman!" Do you trust women?** I married one and we've been together for 39 years. But I'd never turn my back on her when the moon is full! **Do you use libraries much?** I visit libraries a lot to give talks, but now never borrow books. That's because I like to buy them and keep them in case I want to read them again. As a child, I visited a library every Saturday and always read the two books I'd borrowed by the following weekend. My family could never have afforded to buy all the books that I read. That's why libraries are so important.—Joseph Delaney