

Christian Novel From England Being Poised to Rival Harry Potter Series

In Shadowmancer, written by an Anglican vicar in the United Kingdom, God's power overcomes witchcraft

A Spirit-filled African teenager arrives in 18th century England—only to find the place overrun with witchcraft. And the source of the darkness is the local parish priest.

That's the setting for a new novel, *Shadowmancer*, that has been described as "hotter than Potter." United Kingdom publishers Faber and Faber have deliberately pitted it against J.K. Rowling's modern classic.

But the brains behind this latest blockbuster is a 43-year-old Anglican vicar, the Rev. Graham Taylor, whose inspiration is firmly rooted in his Christian faith.

While he has made wicked parson Obadiah Demurral the villain of the plot, he also brings Ethiopian teenager Raphah (from the Hebrew for "the Lord who heals") to join in the fight against him. Demurral is a sadistic sorcerer, whereas Raphah is filled with the spirit of Riathamus (from the Latin for "King of kings").

With two young comrades, Kate and Thomas, Raphah gets caught up in the war against evil. When Raphah calls on the Spirit of Riathamus, tongues of fire and a whirlwind are the result. When he prays for healing, everyone in the room is forced to the floor because of "the weight of the glory" upon them.

It sounds like a great plan that's come together. But on the surface at least, Shadowmancer looks more like a happy accident.

Taylor—a policeman-turned-priest who'd never written a book before—felt “moved by God” to write a children's fantasy novel. “I've been working with people involved in witchcraft for over 20 years,” he said, “and wanted to write something for children that was as thrilling and fantastic as Potter.”

While giving his characters a universal appeal, this father of three also made sure his story had a strong force for good. “Why can't people get excited about the power of the Spirit of God?” he said. “I wanted a book that contained that.”

He prayed, and started writing on “a still October night” in his Yorkshire vicarage. So Shadowmancer was born—with its key references to a deity who heals, delivers from evil spirits and gives people peace and joy in their lives.

Taylor tried various publishers in England and the United States, but suffered from the common writer's condition of “the rejection slip.” Determined to see his book appear in print, he sold his motorbike to fund its publication.

The move paid off. Last fall, 2,000 copies sold in just four weeks. Taylor started praying again because he couldn't cope with the demand. Then he received a phone call from the person who'd signed Rowling to her publisher.

On the caller's advice, he hired a literary agent who signed him to “a very nice deal” with leading U.K. publisher Faber and Faber. “Then all heaven was let loose,” he said. Taylor

appeared on TV and radio shows and in newspaper columns across the United Kingdom. Mail arrived "by the bagload."

Some people involved in witchcraft asked for help. Other readers asked if the God of Shadowmancer could bring them peace. "It's had a deep spiritual effect," he said. This church minister ended up setting the literary world alight with his story of spiritual warfare. "It's been called the 'must-have book,'" he said.

Taylor later discovered the term "shadowmancing" is used by a group of American occultists to describe contacting the spirit world. The book contains stark warnings against such practices.

While the Harry Potter characters have "spells coming out of their ears," Shadowmancer promotes the power of prayer. It has caused such a stir, copies are being imported by entrepreneurial Americans who are reportedly reselling them for \$50 to \$100 a copy.

Ironically, Taylor has experienced opposition from other Christians, who have challenged him for writing about witchcraft. But the author knows where the battle lines are drawn—his previous parish was Whitby, the dramatic backdrop for Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Taylor feels that Christians should be writing works of fantasy fiction that can bring an influence in the marketplace—just like Shadowmancer. Penguin Putnam Books—one of the biggest U.S. publishers—plans to release the title in April, and talks are already under way regarding the film rights.

As U.K. bookstores geared up for their summer reading campaigns, Taylor had snatched the No. 3 position on the children's fiction chart. But at the end of the day, he confessed, "I'd rather talk to people about Jesus than my book."

Clive Price in England