

The Man Who Challenged Harry Potter

G.P. Taylor is intrigued by graveyards, wizardry and ancient folklore. But the author of the popular new book *Shadowmancer* is an Anglican priest who's been filled with the Holy Spirit.

Whitby is an unlikely birthplace for epic adventure. It's a quaint fishing port on the Yorkshire coast of England where sea-gulls whirl above narrow cobbled streets, tourists browse in used bookstores and the greatest challenge is finding a parking spot.

But behind the scenery lurks something mysterious. Something otherworldly.

Bram Stoker chose Whitby as the place to write and set part of his chilling tale of the undead, *Dracula*. And more recently Whitby was the inspiration for an unlikely novel written by an English country parson. Published in England last year, G.P. Taylor's *Shadowmancer* was dubbed "hotter than Potter" by the British media, outselling the latest installment of J.K. Rowling's blockbuster Harry Potter series when released on the same day.

Shadowmancer topped the best-sellers charts for months and seems set to repeat its success on this side of the Atlantic, judging by initial responses to the book's American release in April.

Publisher's Weekly described Taylor's novel as "a dark and weighty morality tale" that would "keep readers madly turning the pages." Set in and around the picturesque villages and

coastline where Taylor served as an Anglican priest for more than a decade, the book tells how two young friends and a shipwrecked young African attempt to prevent a fallen 18th century vicar from tapping into the ultimate power of evil.

Taylor insists that he did not set out to write a "Christian book." Indeed, some Christian bookstores in his homeland refused to carry it.

But *Shadowmancer* is full of biblical themes and imagery, including chilling clashes between spiritual forces of darkness and light. The African character worships a Supreme Being named Riathamus, a corruption of an old English word for "King of Kings."

The book draws from Taylor's years of personal experience—both as an occult practitioner himself, and later as a minister who has helped many people break their ties with the occult.

"All the other books around looking at the occult I saw did so from an occult perspective, and none of them were giving a monotheistic perspective to witchcraft, on the relationship between God and the occult," Taylor told *Charisma*.

"My book lays down that God is powerful. In this day and age we have got to a situation where we have castrated God, when all He is good for is praying to when you want something ... yet He is the most powerful, far more powerful than any demons or witches."

Taylor deliberately positioned himself under the cultural radar so that secularized Brits would not label him a "fundamentalist nut," as they often describe evangelical

Christians. His brief biography on the book jacket describes him simply as someone who “has spent the whole of his life searching for the hidden secrets of the universe” and who “lectures on the paranormal and folklore, and lives in a secluded graveyard”—an allusion to the fact that his parsonage adjoined the church’s cemetery.

“If I had written that I was a fat, 45-year-old priest who was a boring old fart, a lot of people would have said, ‘I’m not reading a book by a vicar,’” explains Taylor, whose broad, 6-foot-1-inch frame hints at his former life as a policeman.

Having won an admiring audience and multiple book and movie contracts, Taylor now feels more comfortable telling the remarkable story behind his fictional success.

Rough Edges

Charisma interviewed Taylor at Ravenhall Hotel, an old cliff-top hall with windows overlooking the waters of Robin Hood’s Bay. The hotel plays a role in Taylor’s novel.

“I’m a born-again, Spirit-filled believer,” the author says. “Jesus has transformed my life. It hasn’t been overnight, and He is still doing it. He is knocking off the rough edges, but in the 25 years I have been a Christian, Jesus has radically changed me as a person. I have seen God at work.”

Some have found faith through reading *Shadowmancer*. One girl wrote to tell him that she and her parents “didn’t believe in God, but now we have read your book and I think we do.” Another letter came from a woman—adults love the book, too, though it is really for children—who said the novel freed her

from depression.

Though he is unashamedly Christian, Taylor refuses to be pigeonholed. Although he has been drawn into media and literary circles, he scorns the pretension he sees and prefers to ride up front in the limos that are sent for him so he can talk to the driver.

Though his book is already in more than a dozen languages, he's turned down a French translation because the country refused to back the United States' military involvement in Iraq.

In the church world he's a bit of an oddity, too. He's a Bible-believing, tongues-speaking vicar who casts out demons—in a denomination that is lost in liberalism.

At theological college, Taylor says, he was advised to “put your Bible away and use your brain for a change.” The principal told Taylor: “It's people like you who make me want to leave the Church of England.”

Meanwhile Taylor is considered a loose cannon by evangelicals for his occasional use of earthy language and his refusal to go along with some of what goes on in ministry that he feels has more to do with chicanery than charisma.

After one well-known charismatic leader in his region had made “prophetic” statements that failed to come to pass, Taylor wrote the man to remind him that the Bible says false prophets should be stoned. He asked the man where they should meet to comply with Scripture.

Shadowmancer's success story reads like a wild fiction novel of its own. Taylor wrote the book in nine months, pretty much for fun, after his injuries from police work curtailed his weekly game of golf.

He felt prompted by God to write something that would challenge the widespread glamorizing of the occult in fiction for young people. But, he adds: "I was doing it for my own enjoyment. I never thought many people would read it."

Turned down by an American Christian publisher who thought his submission was trash, Taylor raised enough money to self-publish 2,500 copies by selling the motorcycle he used to make pastoral visits. He had only enough cash to print so many pages, forcing a pared-down revision.

"That's why it ends pretty fast," Taylor says wryly.

He chose to use his initials partly to echo popular novelist J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series. Another reason: He shares the name Graham Taylor with a former manager of the national soccer team, who had been a subject of some ridicule in the media.

Publishing under his own Mount Publishing—a reference to the gospel account of Jesus' sermon, which Taylor calls "the greatest piece of literature ever written"—he thought it might take him 10 years to sell the copies that filled every spare corner of the vicarage.

He prayed over his books and took some to a local bookstore that held a signing, and things suddenly took off. A member of his church sent a copy to a relative who turned out to be the

former chairman of the British publisher Bloomsbury, who had discovered J.K. Rowling. The man read the book, called Taylor immediately and advised him to get an agent.

Taylor did, and within days he had a contract with Faber and Faber, who decided to bring their version out the same day as Rowling's fifth installment, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, which released in June 2003. (The book was jointly published this year in the United States by G.P. Putnam's Sons and Charisma House.)

My God Is Bigger Than Your God

Though Taylor didn't expect his book to have such dramatic impact, at the same time he wasn't surprised at its flyaway triumph months later, when copies of the self-published first edition were being sold for \$3,000.

"When something is of God, then it just happens, and you have to stand back and let God do it; you mustn't push it," he says.

He also suspects that if he had known he would have the opportunity to impact millions, he'd have been his own stumbling block: "If I had sat down to write this for Christians, it wouldn't have been used throughout the world, it would have been rubbish. It's taught me to just write what comes, and not to write for a particular audience."

Shadowmancer weaves in facts from times past and folklore from a part of England known for its bleak moors and superstition. The region around Whitby, Taylor says, is "unusually linked" with the occult.

"When it's night it can be the most frightening place in the world. Very eerie and scary; very much back to that primeval place," he says.

Taylor also drew on his own experiences battling the occult. He became known for being able to drive evil spirits out of homes by the power of God, with news of the exorcisms (he calls them "house blessings") passed on in the community.

Eschewing the hyperspirituality of some involved in spiritual warfare, he approaches its reality with a disarming matter-of-factness. Once a man known for his involvement in the occult said he was going to put a curse on Taylor and his family.

Taylor invited the man in for a cup of tea and explained to his wife the reason for the visit. "That's nice," she said. Then Taylor warned the man about the dangers of placing an unwarranted curse on someone, and how the Bible says it will return to them.

"I wasn't bothered because my God is bigger than his god," the author says.

Taylor forged his ministry in Whitby during five years at St. Mary's, the old Anglican church perched above the town. He discovered that each October the place drew several thousand Goths and vampire cultists who gathered in the churchyard around what was reputed to be Count Dracula's grave.

One night, as the visitors wound their way through the town and up the steep 199 steps to the church that is mentioned in Stoker's book, Taylor stretched out his hands and declared the

authority of Jesus over the place.

“I shook their hands as they arrived and welcomed them in the name of Jesus, told them they were coming onto holy ground, and started witnessing to them,” he recalls.

In subsequent years he held a special service for the visitors during their Dracula convention, providing food and drink and telling them how their undead hero could be killed with a stake through the heart. Jesus, however, had been pierced on the cross but returned from the dead forever, Taylor told them.

It was while at Whitby, too, that Taylor became convinced of the reality of territorial spirits, a subject he explores in his second book, Wormwood. To be released soon, it follows the adventures of a Shadowmancer character encountering darkness and deliverance in the streets of 18th century London.

“I began to realize that this was a war taking place in heaven,” Taylor said of his time in Whitby. He was part of a group of local church leaders who united to pray over the town early one morning “that whatever was dampening Christianity would be broken.

“After that, we started seeing people get converted left, right and center,” he says.

A Powerful Conversion

Taylor believes some of his literary creativity springs from Whitby’s holy heritage. St. Mary’s Church—the setting for

Shadowmancer's climax—adjoins an even older Christian site, the ruins of St. Hilda's Abbey, a missionary outpost dating back to the seventh century. It is also the likely site of Caedmon's encounter with the Holy Spirit, as a result of which the famous monk wrote the first poetry in English to praise God.

Taylor's own introduction to the occult was sparked by a near-fatal fall into a river as a child of 7. "I had an out-of-body experience, seeing myself drowning, and wondered what happens after death," he says.

He began reading about witchcraft and magic, and as a teen was "apprenticed" in the occult by an older man. "I got involved in dark things," he recalls. "The world of the occult isn't dark as you would expect; the people are lovely, kind, openhearted. They're very genuine, caring people—but it is evil.

"Not openly evil, though. Nobody would be interested in anything that was openly evil, would they? So Satan sets something that is just slightly off the mark; people come into it and think they are doing good."

Taylor began reading tarot cards and casting spells to help people get money or find work. But he couldn't shake an awareness of Jesus, and the sense that "something wasn't quite right," he says.

Reminiscing, he adds: "I felt like the power source wasn't quite right. I was using elemental spirits, channeling. It's dangerous. If you have tarot cards in your house, you might as well put a satellite dish on your roof and say, 'Welcome,

Satan,' because it's an open door."

Leaving home at 16, he eventually drifted from his occult dealings, turning instead to the unholy trinity of sex, drugs and rock'n' roll. But after five years in London, where he worked as a music promoter, he decided to return to his Yorkshire roots. He got a job as a social worker with the profoundly deaf and met a group of Christians.

"I came to them with my jumble of ideas of what God was, and through their grace and their love they just kept praying and talking to me," he recalls.

Finally one night he gave his life to Christ. Though serious about his new faith, he felt something still wasn't quite right until he had a dramatic encounter with the power of God.

Despite believing the Holy Spirit "wasn't for today," he went to hear a Pentecostal speaker one night. When the man prayed for Taylor, he says, "it was as if someone lit a billion candles of light, shooting up my body and out of the top of my head, and I started speaking in tongues. ... I felt absolutely washed clean ... in the presence of God. It was brilliant."

He went on to receive specific prayer to break past occult ties.

"The only way to get out is to get saved, delivered and healed," he says, "and you have to go through that process. Salvation is not enough if you have been involved with the occult. You have to get it all out and ask people around you with holy hands to pray."

After becoming a policeman, Taylor found his charismatic experience to be an unorthodox advantage. Once a word of knowledge led him to warn colleagues that a wanted man was armed. On another occasion a man wielding a large knife dropped the weapon after Taylor, unarmed and without backup, confronted him and told him that Jesus loved him.

Taylor served as an unofficial chaplain to other officers, but his police service ended brutally when a gang of drunken youths attacked him after he arrested one of their friends. As he went down under a hail of blows, the man he had arrested taunted him by shouting: "Where's your God now?"

Taylor was left with hearing loss, hip disability and post-traumatic stress, but he continued his pursuit of ordination and turned up at the court hearing for some of those arrested for his beating. Showing Christ-like forgiveness, he spoke on their behalf and saved them from imprisonment.

During his years as a busy Anglican priest—responsible for several churches and often leading up to eight or nine services on a Sunday—Taylor saw unusual miracles. People were healed from cancer after he prayed for them, and infertile couples conceived. He even led a convicted murderer to Christ.

When he and his wife, Kathy, were expecting their first child, they were advised to have an abortion for fear that the medications used to treat a serious illness had caused deformities. They refused, prayed—and rejoiced when perfectly formed Hannah arrived.

The unexpected success of the last 18 months has been accompanied by personal difficulty. Taylor has been

hospitalized with heart problems three times and was forced to retire from ministry. Unable to fly, he arrived in the U.S. for a recent promotional visit in yesteryear style—on board the Queen Mary 2.

He has welcomed the end of his Anglican priesthood as timely, believing that the day had come for a separation from a denomination that is increasingly adrift from orthodoxy. His book royalties will provide a home for his family—he and Kathy have three daughters—in a small blip-on-the-map village (population 400) near his last vicarage, where a “We * Jesus” sticker hangs above the front door.

The family continues to live at the same simple level of their ministry years, though he has increased his giving. “If you distance yourself from God [when material success arrives], you might as well forget the whole thing,” he says. “God will allow this to go on as long as it is useful to Him, and as long as He knows I can keep with it.”

Fame and fortune haven’t changed Taylor, adds Robbie Munday, who works at Ravenhall. “He’s a lovely fellow, got a lovely personality; very easy to get along with. He’s still the same guy he used to be before the book.”

Taylor suspects he will be involved in church ministry in some new form in the future, while focusing on more writing. “I have lots of stories; I never thought I would get the opportunity to tell them,” he says. “There is something quickening in my spirit at the moment about taking this word to people.”

Having spoken for years to church and community groups about

the dangers of the occult, he welcomes his wider audience.

Says Taylor: "For too long the children's book market has been swamped with fantasy books that glorify paganism and the occult. I think God is saying now is the time. The problem of the Christian market is that the Christian books out there don't cut the mustard. They are too 'goddy,' and would never be read by non-Christians.

"I'm not a writer, I'm a storyteller. Jesus taught in parables because they are a lot easier to take in than the telly [TV] evangelist bashing you on the head with a Bible. I want to challenge people where they are.

"I want people to know that God loves us and cares for us and wants to bring wholeness and healing to us. I want them to know He is capable of frightening away any evil in the world, and that God is the only thing that we have to hang on to in life. ... The incarnation of Jesus is the most important thing that ever happened in the world."

That's not the kind of comment you'd expect from an author whose book just hit the New York Times' best-seller list. But G.P. Taylor has never been one to fit the typical mold.

Headed for the Screen

Although Hollywood director Roman Polanski wanted to make *Shadowmancer*, the book's author sold the rights to a Christian filmmaker.

G.P. Taylor's *Shadowmancer* took an improbable route to the top

of the best-seller charts, and the author of the dark fantasy novel wants the movie version of his book to follow a similar path into theaters. That's why Taylor snubbed Oscar-winning director Roman Polanski and instead signed a \$4 million deal with a newcomer to the film world.

Taylor sold the film rights to Lisa Marie Butkiewicz, whose major production credit is a teenage assistant's gig on *Young Guns II*. Fortitude Films, the company she founded with an investment partner, hopes to have the *Shadowmancer* movie on the screen by late next year or early 2006. The film's anticipated budget will be between \$75 and \$100 million.

Taylor vetoed Polanski's involvement because he was worried that the story's positive spiritual underpinning might be lost. Butkiewicz shares Taylor's concern. "Good films are all about the story, and Hollywood is running out of ideas," she told *Charisma*.

"Graham is a brilliant writer, but it would be very easy to pervert the book if it got into the wrong hands," she said. "There are beautiful Scriptures throughout it, and they are powerful and they will set the captives free if the film is presented properly, and that is what we intend to do."

Butkiewicz first read about *Shadowmancer*'s British success in *Charisma*. She beat several top Hollywood names to bag the deal, and she describes her winning bid as being "like David and Goliath."

A communication graduate from Oral Roberts University who "always wanted to work in film," Butkiewicz moved to Los Angeles from Arizona three years ago after selling a

successful business to follow her dream of making positive entertainment that can influence the world for Christ.

“In a very short time I was sitting in meetings with top-level Hollywood executives,” she says. “Some people I know well who have been in the industry told me it had taken others years to get to the people I was seeing in a few short months.”

She had several family-oriented film projects in development, but she put them on hold to concentrate on Shadowmancer. The challenge is scary, she says, but she won't let fear stop her.

Says Butkiewicz: “I like what Joyce Meyer says: ‘If God tells you to do something and you are afraid, do it afraid.’”

Of Men, Magic and Wizards

Some Christians have blasted J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. But many believers, including G.P. Taylor, say God can use fantasy fiction.

When J. K. Rowling wrote her first novel in a café, she didn't expect to become one of the richest women in the world—or one of the most popular authors of all time. She also had no idea that Christians would label her a witch or burn her books.

Rowling, who was a single mother on welfare when she wrote Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, has gotten used to being a rich and famous author now that her books have sold more than 250 million copies. But she apparently remains baffled by allegations from religious people that she's promoting witchcraft.

The Harry Potter series has stirred controversy among Christians, some of whom accuse Rowling of teaching children to cast spells. She contends that her books are pure fantasy, similar to books by J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis.

Surprisingly, Rowling is defended by G.P. Taylor, the Anglican vicar who wrote *Shadowmancer*.

"She's not a witch," Taylor says of Rowling. "I have read so much rubbish about her. She wouldn't know a witch if one came up and beat her with a broom."

Taylor's main concern is that some children who read about Harry Potter and his young friends at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry might become intrigued with occult practices.

"The problem isn't all that Hogwarts stuff she writes about," Taylor adds. "It's that it opens a door [of interest]; that's what people ought to be worried about."

Though some Christians have applauded the Potter books, others have organized book burnings. Those who favor the books say they promote positive values like other fantasies with spiritual themes such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series.

Opposition to Potter was fueled by a report on the satirical Web site *The Onion*, which quoted Rowling as saying people should be glad the books were luring people to Satan. The false statement was forwarded by some Christians who thought it was factual.

Evangelical Christians typically have criticized children's entertainment with occult themes. Four years ago churches warned members to stay away from the Pokémon games and cartoons because they are based on magic. In July, missiologist and spiritual warfare expert C. Peter Wagner sponsored a conference for teachers, parents, youth leaders, and counselors to address the ways in which books, movies, music, and video games increasingly are making the occult seem acceptable.

Since Harry Potter became a publishing sensation, Rowling has spawned a mini-boom in the Christian book scene, with more than a dozen titles debating the pros and cons about the series.

Connie Neal, who has written two books defending Potter, was due to lead a Christian Faith and Fantasy Tour to Britain this month that was to visit sites associated with the writings of Rowling, Tolkien and Lewis.

Taylor is more alarmed by the writing of Phillip Pullman, a self-avowed atheist whose award-winning His Dark Materials trilogy of children's books attacks God as a failed, flawed deity—and which the Archbishop of Canterbury has said should be studied in British schools.

"A lot of books have been released that disrespect God. I think now is the time to grab some of these people and tell them, 'There's a God much more powerful than you know,'" Taylor said. "There's too many God-knockers out there."

Taylor detects some obvious bias against Christians who try to

make a mark in the literary world. “It’s OK for Philip Pullman to say that God is small, or God is dead,” Taylor says, “yet it’s not OK for G.P. Taylor to say that Jesus Christ is King of Kings and that prayer is a wonderful way of talking to Him. There’s a bias out there against God that needs to be set right.”

Andy Butcher is senior writer for Charisma and editor of Christian Retailing magazine. A veteran journalist and native of England, he grew up in Manchester. He interviewed G.P. Taylor in April.