

Ian Weir: The book of Daniel

National Post - Brad Frenette

From the three-mouthed frozen beast in Dante's *Inferno* to the persuasive rebel in *Paradise Lost* and onwards to C.S. Lewis' "incompetent tempter" *Screwtape*, the Devil has taken many guises in Western literature over the years. Until Ian Weir cast him into Victorian England, though, never has the dark one been asked to step into the ring.

Set in the savagery of lower-class London in the 1850s, Weir's knockout debut *Daniel O'Thunder*, released this month by Douglas & McIntyre, tells the story of a Christian former prize-fighter who challenges the Devil to a bare-knuckled fight.

Like the plot of the book, the path that Weir took to complete it is unique. The idea first came to him as a graduate student in London 25 years ago, though he set it aside to carve out a successful career as a dramatist and Gemini-winning screenwriter and television producer. As Weir reached middle age, however, he felt the urge to return to the long-percolating story. Soon, he received that rare thing for a first-time novelist: a commission.

On the line from his home in Langley, B.C., the 53-year-old Weir recalls, "I got an email from Chris Labonte from Douglas & McIntyre. He asked if I'd ever thought of writing a novel. I said, 'Funny you should mention that.' "

Labonte asked Weir to send over a summary of the idea. As Weir recalls, "At the end of it, [Labonte] said: 'I'll have the contract to you by Monday.' And I thought, 'If there ever is a chance to write a novel, this is the one.' "

As presented in *Daniel O'Thunder*, Weir's Devil is "vain as a fading tragedian," and imbued with a "vague and creeping dread" that he is losing his relevance. According to Weir, here is "an entity who begins to perceive himself as hopelessly out of step with his time. In the misty past, which he has ceased to remember clearly, he had a great power and a potency and more than all of that, had a way to define himself."

This is not really the Devil's tale, however. On the other side of this fight card is Daniel O'Thunder, a charismatic 33-year-old evangelical, a former British soldier and ex-bare-knuckle boxer who now spends his days spreading the message of the Christian Gospels to the needy in London's gutters. Big and strong, with a face beaten ugly by bare fists but possessing a voice tuned to "convince [sparrows] they were eagles," O'Thunder senses the Devil's presence in London, and calls him forth for an old-fashioned punch-up.

"On a certain level, [Daniel] is a cockeyed Christ figure," says Weir. "In a playful way, the novel plays around with the structure of the Gospels."

Like the Gospels, the narrative is built by several voices, including a Mary Magdalene-like prostitute named Nell and a fallen priest named Jack, who, like St. Paul, experiences his own Damascus conversion.

In mid-19th-century London, Weir finds parallels to our own time: "In a really intriguing way, it's a prefiguration of our period. A whole way of seeing the world and, more importantly, a whole way of being in the world, are breaking down."

For a career dramatist, the ability to play with the vastness of the plot was a revelation for Weir, who found a new creative freedom in completing the novel. "In TV and film, the restrictions are most pronounced, for reasons of financial budget. Sitting down to write a novel, there was that glorious realization that I can quite literally write anything I feel."

This freedom, however, was not without its challenges.

"Working as a screenwriter," Weir says, "you are constantly in a situation where you get to fob off creative decisions to other people. As a novelist, you are doing all that yourself. Intellectually, of course, I knew that was the case, but – actually being in the middle of that and discovering that there was nowhere to turn except inward – I'll be honest, that was daunting as hell."

Ian Weir will participate in Footnotes, tomorrow at 8 p.m., and will read from Daniel O'Thunder on Saturday. For complete coverage from IFOA XXX, visit nationalpost.com/theafterword.