

Frank Ryan 1 April 2007

Editor's note: Here, LabLit.com presents the conclusion of 'The Dragon in the Stone', a weekly blog from Frank Ryan. For the past four months, Ryan, a scientist, doctor and best-selling author, has been sharing his attempts to publish and promote his latest novel, *The Domsday Genie*, via an untraditional route.

In the night, I revisit my study to make certain that the threads of destiny have been drawn to a single focus. My new website is nearing completion at www.fprbooks.com. This is going to be far more critical to marketing and sales of an e-book than it would ever be for a print version. A print book would, by now, have been sold to booksellers from nine months before publication. Orders would have been taken many months ago and perhaps half the first run would by now be on the shelves. Review copies would have been in the hands of review editors for weeks. For the lucky ten or fifteen per cent of authors, media tours and book signings in booksellers would now begin. For the e-book author things will be very different. The sales and review aspects are still evolving. And that means that for a self-publishing e-book author, such as myself, I must learn the new ropes as I go along.

Critical to all such endeavours are two factors. First we have the structure and presentation of the e-book itself. Second, and it may surprise people to realise this, is the structure and presentation of the website. And as ever in the important aspects of life, little things – tiny things – loom important.

Let us start with the e-book. For easy reading, I have chosen Georgia as my font with line spacing at 1.5 and the page rulers at 13.5cm x 23.5 (approx 5¾" x 9½"). Unlike a print book, where the reader has nothing to do but open the covers, I feel it necessary to make suggestions for comfort and attractiveness of presentation. In Adobe reader, which most PC users will possess, I suggest my readers turn to the Tools menu, click on object data to show the object data toolbar and choose "full screen". The icon looks like a vertical white oblong in a dark monitor. Here it will look and read like a conventional book with a whole page on screen at once. Pages can be turned with a click on the navigation keys. To return to bog-standard Adobe, all they need to is click Escape.

Next comes the cover images – and I need a series of different qualities and sizes, whether for the book itself, or for full display on the website and thumbnails. Decisions on image type and sizes become one of the major irritations for me at this stage. Given the need to upload and download book, and images, I cannot use the high res images we use with print books. There is an inevitable trade-off between size and quality. And boy do I make mistakes! My biggest gaff is to choose GIFs instead of Jpegs for the thumbnails on my sale cart page. When I publish and view, the bloody things dissolve into ghosts. I am obliged to replace them all with Jpeg thumbnails. It is all the more irritating that my version of Microsoft Photodraw does not include Jpegs in the drop-down menu.

Damn, shit and blast it!

But then, at this late stage, I discover that if I click on "Save For Use As" instead of "Save As" in the "File" menu, I am given a series of useful options which include Jpeg thumbnails. It is now child's play to create the Jpeg thumbnails perfect for the cart. This same dropdown menu also offers me a range of image qualities which proves useful for my calculations for both the final e-book cover and the web-based images. Boy, would this have been useful to know from the very beginning!

Get hold of this idea! Your website is going to be the bookshop in which your readers will browse. The home page is your window onto the High Street and once you entice people within, you've got to make it comfortable and pleasant, so they will decide to stay a while and have a good look round. E-book and website – it's an arranged marriage!

I decide to keep it simple and welcoming. One aspect in which e-books really do score over print versions is the potential for writer-reader interaction. My previous thrillers drew no more than half a dozen readers' letters for each title, in spite of the fact they gathered in excess of a quarter of a million readers – probably close to 350,000. Such interaction is far easier with e-books, which so readily translate to e-mail communication. And this level of interaction comes naturally to a website. I have included an e-mail contact form through which readers can write in to tell me what they think of it all, the book, the self-publishing adventure, whatever they like.

Come on in, guys – come join the adventure!

But there's more – like other tiers of creative interaction.

Here, as and from the new publication date, Monday, April 2, they will see Mark's dazzling cover art for the first time. I have invited Mark to provide me with biographical details for his own page on my site. His page will appear as soon as I receive it. And soon I'll link to his newly constructed artist's website – I love such creative interactions. I hope also to do something similar with Jamie and Marco. There are no time constraints with e-books. You can readily adapt and change the website – even the book itself – in response to circumstance and opportunity.

I truly believe that the advent of e-books will change publishing. Look at what Charlie Stross discovered! He found he could massively increase sales of his print books by offering them as free e-book downloads. I have given very serious consideration to this. I am convinced that he is right. But at present I have no print version to market through the e-book. Consequently I have adopted an intermediate position. I will sell the e-book very cheaply (£2.99 – roughly \$5.50). What does a reader have to lose



Frank Ryan

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just to try it? There's no trip to town, no postage costs, no delays in delivery. And I offer the tempter of a major download free – roughly a third of the entire book – at the click of a key.

All the while, as I make endless minor amendments and polishes, I am getting feedback from important sources. A chance conversation with a maga print book distributor informs me that e-books sales are rising rapidly – so rapidly they have decided to get on board. They are fascinated with what I am doing. I send them a courtesy copy, which they love. They plan to sell my book in the near future.

Hey guys – come on! Things really are changing, and they are changing right here and now.

I send another courtesy copy to Dan at Google, who has long been supportive. He offers me advice on improving the cover size. I do so and resend. He replies the next day: "The cover image certainly looks improved – as does your website, by the way. I will pass this file along to the rest of our team for processing." Good old Google!

I know the Society of Authors is also interested, and so is one major UK publisher. Here are his actual words: "Hi Frank. This is all rather exciting and new – I shall be intrigued to see how it evolves both from the perspective of actual downloads made but also what profile/focus it gets – there's been a lot in the media of late re the whole concept of digital publishing/digitisation..."

You guys listening out there?

Usually publication day is a bit of an anti-climax for a writer since his or her work is largely done and all they can do is wait to see what happens. Not so for a self-publishing author, who must engage in a new phase of the adventure. And yet there will be no adventure at all if we dragon liberators do not enter the gladiatorial arena!

Come on – get up off your knees and fight!

I stand on the beach of bones before the stagnant lake and await the sunrise. My body, from head to foot, is ensheathed in spiders' silk. In my right hand the Fir Bolg battleaxe hums and throbs. It should weigh more than a blacksmith's anvil, yet I feel almost no weight at all, such is the uplifting effect of the runes within it. Here, on an altar of lava, an egg three feet long and black as a beetle is about to hatch.

Time to rouse my youthful companions from sleep. I cannot offer them the chance to wash their faces, for they are similarly ensheathed in spiders' silk. It takes them a few minutes to find their feet – and then to notice what's in my hand.

'Grandad –!'

'It's the Fir Bolg battleaxe.'

'Wow!' They study the sigmoid shape, like two-opposed scimitar curves of sparkling blue-black steel on either side of the porcelain-white hilt.

'Be careful not to touch the blades – but you can touch the hilt if you like.'

I hold it invitingly in my hand. The hilt has been carved from a freshly extracted T Rex canine tooth – a present from the Goddess. When they reach out and tentatively make contact with it, they jump back with startled cries.

'It tingles!'

'You're feeling the runes of power.'

'Cool!'

Book is perched on the altar and leaning its spine against the giant egg. It whispers, in a slurry whirr of its pages, 'I have knowledge, Sire, that might be interesting to your ears.'

'Uh-huh?'

'Tidings of lampposts being decorated... Lovers of books, fixing chains with padlocks.'

'Book – you're drunk!'

'Indeed I am! Battle nerves, I fear. But surely tis the moment for a toast?'

'You're the only one free to drink it.' I pick up the bottle from the base of the rock, refill the cap for my oracular companion, then watch it take a swig.

'For the liberation...(Hic!)...of science in fiction!'

A sudden breeze alerts me to the fact dawn is near. I glance up at the moonless night sky, where the stars are dissolving in the first milky glimmer of daylight.

Ratzi shrieks: 'Guv – e's 'atchin!'

He's right. A lacework of cracks filigree the egg-shell, lit by some inner luminescence. The enormous egg rocks from side to side. Suddenly it splits wide open as a toothy snout emerges, followed by the unfolding shape, vaguely reminiscent of a pterodactyl. In moments an elegant form, perhaps three and a half feet, not counting the tail, stretches its serrated neck to its full limit, and, with a crackling series of flicks and flaps, it fans the extraordinary reach of its wings.

'Wot a picture!' Ratzi is clicking his Brownie.

Pappa has her arm around his shoulder. 'Stupendous – oh, bliss!'

We hear its natal cry: strangely brassy, yet hauntingly beautiful, like the baritone pealing of bells.

But it is the eyes that really enchant us. They are large and multifaceted, like enormous diamonds illuminated with a blue-white inner glow.

Immediately my ears catch the clicking and ratchet sounds of weapons being cocked. I hurl myself in front of the dragon and extend my arms to act as a shield.

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'Battle stations!' I call to Pappa and Ratzl.

'Ready, Guv!'

'Aye, aye, Sir!'

'Now!' I roar the command.

A huge shape, greenly phosphorescent over its cowl and wings, breaks cover from behind me, flapping awkwardly into flight. It utters a croaky shriek before heading northwards over the beach of bones.

From behind the rocks the roar goes up: 'Baggems – bag 'em!'

It is immediately followed by the counter roar: 'Strewth – blast 'em!'

The landscape erupts into a fusillade of explosions, as hundreds of shotguns, Tommy guns and blunderbusses compete for their target. Smoke and the smell of cordite fills the air over the black rocks as shreds of feather and bone hail from the sky. The hordes break cover and start fighting over the spoils.

'Yer fooled 'em, Guv!'

'Not for long, I fear!' What they've bagged and blasted is the biggest carrion crow Ratzl and Pappa could find in the dead of night, suitably camouflaged and launched with the prompting of a hob-nailed boot.

Even as the first cries of outrage arise from the squabbling hunters, the wind howls with a new ferocity over the black rocks. Facing into it, the dragon tests its flight muscles, flapping the long wings and pealing its bell-like call again and again. The Baggems and Blastems have stopped fighting among themselves to gaze, spellbound, at the preening creature astride its rocky altar. With every movement, rainbows sheen over the glittering scales.

For one brief moment our eyes meet, dragon and creator.

But the moment is interrupted by an ominous crackling, like the splintering of bone. In the goblin house across the stagnant lake, a maw, like a shark's mouth, appears in the wall. The Daemos emerges from its portal, cowed and enshrouded in cardinal red. Within the cowl, a face as pallid as death is constantly metamorphosing, male, female, young and old, all races, and all possible expressions, from love to hate, from fury to indifference. On its left forearm is the sleek black raptor, Thanatos.

The gladiatorial arena is set. I must face this combat alone. No quarter will be asked or given.

I advance a few paces, to distance myself from my youthful companions. Behind me dawn is breaking in fissures of turquoise, surmounted by the spreading mane of red. My muse has joined me. In my lofted right hand, the runes inscribed over the twin blades of the Fir Bolg battleaxe burst into flame.

'Pappa – take Val and Teri to safety!'

The dragon starts to beat its wings. A tentative lift, then, with a sudden intense flurry, it takes to the air in an awkward, slow-flapping spiral.

The Daemos glides closer, on what appears a millipede-like locomotion of myriad tiny feet, to pause at the opposite shore of the lake. Through the spiders' silk I see what would otherwise have been invisible. Creeping tentacles of a fog-like miasma are invading the landscape. I recall Granny Dew's warning: 'you will see the treachery that would otherwise have been invisible to mortal sight.' The poison envelops me. Without the protection, it would have fatally weakened me. I focus on the eyes of the death-hawk, Thanatos. They are expressionless, flecked with pinpoint points of starlight. They do not blink.

The Daemos taunts me in a voice like pebbles rolling on pebbles. 'You bear but one weapon. There are two of us.'

I glance aloft to see that the dragon makes an easy target. I calculate the likely path of the raptor's flight. A curve of lift and then the vertical strike. I never relax my focus on the eyes...

I catch the single blink in the starlit eyes. The axe is rising even as the claws abandon their perch. But I have underestimated the raptor's strength and speed. There is no initial curve, but a linear bullet-like trajectory.

As with faltering heart I follow the closing of raptor on dragon, I am almost toppled by a sudden tornado of wind. Roaring into the sky, it hurls the dragon a thousand feet off course. The raptor's claws close on air. There is barely time for a shriek of bafflement before the rune-blazing axe hits home. Even from far below, the destruction is awesome to witness. In the flaming carnage of its death, Thanatos tears at the still whirling blade and deflects it, spiralling seawards.

The enraged Daemos splashes it way across the stagnant water, the myriad feet treading water like a collection of pond skaters. As it nears, its malice strikes me like a physical blow.

Suddenly a tiny figure bustles forward from nowhere and puts itself between myself and the Daemos.

'Book – are you crazy?'

'Desist, monster!' It squeaks its outrage, tottering drunkenly from one corner to another over the bones.

With a lubricious glee, the feet trample Book into the sand, sharp nails gouging the cover and ripping pages from their bindings and scattering them to the wind.

As it nears, I see the metamorphosis within the cowl settle on a single countenance. I am gazing at the ogreish face of Baldy Muldoon. His eyes fasten on me with the unblinking stare of a pike. Talons, like scalpel blades, extend from his dead-man's fingers and his jaws open on blood-rimed fangs.

'One weapon!' he taunts.

'Do you remember the prayer you made us say?'

He sneers: 'For the one among us who will be the first to die!'

'Well – it won't be me!'

The Daemos makes its final rush.

I reach skyward, to where the returning tornado bears a spinning flame into the clutch of my right hand. 'The Fir Bolg blade always returns to its master.'

'Take comfort then from your bauble. You forget that we are immortal!'

There is a distinct hum of friction against the tormented air as I whip the flaming blade through a single cleaving arc. Muldoon's head topples from the shrouded carcass of the Daemos.

'No!' It cries at my feet. 'Noooooo! We are immortal... we are immor...'

'None is immortal to the steel of Zeus annealed in the Styx, where even the immortals go when they tire of living.'

I hold ready until I see the severed head and body wither to dust, and then the dust blow away in the keening wind.

Ripping off my spiders' silk cover, I find myself surrounded by cheering Baggems and Blastems.

'Fair play, guv!'

'My privilege to shake the hand of a warrior, Sir!'

'Did you get your pictures, Ratz!'

'An 'ole film full, Guv!' Tears of joy are streaming down Ratz!s face, where at least the right eyes is still in its socket. Pappa throws her arms round him.

I gaze up high into the dawn sky, where my dragon is disappearing into the haze of morning.

I feel a tugging at my hand. 'Grandad. What about Book?'

'Come on!' I grab the bottle of peaty elixir and lead them down the beach until I reach the ruined and bedraggled shape. We hear the moan, 'Woe is me!'

'Grandad – it's still alive!'

'Of course – Book is truly immortal.'

'Alas, my adventuring days are over, Sire!'

'Nonsense! Val and Teri – go find every torn out page.' Meanwhile I bring a capful to its lips. 'Drink – it has healing properties.'

'How kind!' It slurps its way through several capfuls with little mewls of pleasure.

As we set to the task of stuffing the missing pages into their rightful places, and the gouges in the covers begin their art of self-healing, Book suddenly bursts into song. I have never heard it sing before, but now it renders a hearty, if slurry, version of U2's *One Tree Hill*. 'We'll meet again... Hic! When the stars fall down from the skies! Hic...'

Time for me to slump down, cross-legged, on the beach of bones and take one almighty swig of the nectar myself.

'Grandad?'

'Ah-hah?'

'What's the next adventure?'

Meet my newly emergent dragon, *The Doomsday Genie*, in the pages of www.fprbooks.com. Prepare to be thrilled!

I will be happy to keep everyone informed of developments over the coming weeks and months. Many may wish to take up my offer of communication through my website. Come join the adventure!

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Peace talks prove useless as both combatants lay claim to Skira due to previous ownership of it. Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising is the antidote. Like almost any war shooter you'd care to mention, Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising features a single player campaign (there's one mission in this demo), and a multiplayer option. Both offer the same high degree of realism and tactics, require patience and quite a lot of skill. Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising is an excellent tactical shooter, which requires a great deal of time and effort to learn! PROS. Seriously tactical.