

## INTERVIEW WITH JAMES DASHNER

Question:

**What books have influenced you?**

Answer:

Some of the books that have influenced my writing are *Ender's Game* and *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Les Misérables*, and as a kid the Judy Blume books like *Superfudge*. But an author who has affected me a lot is Stephen King; he's kind of dark and scary, but his writing has taught me a lot.

Question:

**What impact do you hope your books have on young readers?**

Answer:

I really want to inspire kids to become writers, and I want to inspire kids to become readers. If anything, my books are entertaining and fast-paced, and if I can just transform one kid from hating reading to loving reading, to me that's as important as anything. I mean, that changes your life. It helps you do better in school, and it provides you with entertainment. So that's the number one thing: helping kids foster a love of reading. In terms of their character or their morals, I don't know how much I'll ever influence that, but usually my characters have a strong moral center or core, and maybe that influences people.

Question:

**What books would you recommend to a fantasy reader just starting out?**

Answer:

Number one is *Enders' Game* by Orson Scott Card. It's science fiction, it's really not that long of a book and it's just brilliantly written, fascinating, and has an awesome ending. It depends on if you're talking about for grown-ups or kids, because the obvious one, it's true, is the *Harry Potter* books. All seven. I love 'em. I love the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* books, and there's

*Fablehaven*, you know, some of those you hear about a lot. For grown-ups it's harder because most fantasy books for adults are a thousand pages long, but there's some good stuff out there. My favorite of all time is by an author named Tad Williams. The series is called *Memory, Sorry and Thorn*. Those are some of my favorite books of all.

Question:

**What books would you recommend giving to an early- or late-teen to help them get excited about reading?**

Answer:

Well, for the teens I would say *Ender's Game*, even though technically he didn't write that for teens. That's when I read it [and] *Ender's Game* changed my life. It sparked a deeper love of reading, and it sparked a deeper love of writing. I don't know whether I'd be where I am if I hadn't read that book. *The Hunger Games* trilogy is really popular right now and teenagers love it. *The Uglies* series by Scott Westerfeld, *The Ranger's Apprentice* series, which is really popular, and the *Percy Jackson* books are also good. Kind of on the darker side is Darren Shan's *Cirque du Freak*—his books are kind of dark and scary.

Question:

**You seem to be very involved in teaching young people about writing. Why is that?**

Answer:

I enjoy it. Probably the biggest thing is that lots of people helped me starting out, and I was always amazed that they were willing to give their time. I would be very ungrateful if I didn't try to pay it forward. I feel like it's my duty, but it's fun, too, so it's not like I'm torturing myself.

Question:

**Did you write much as a kid or teen?**

Answer:

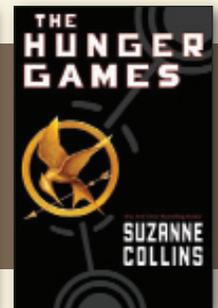
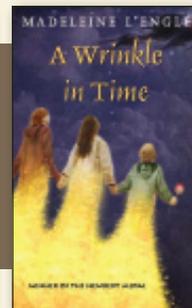
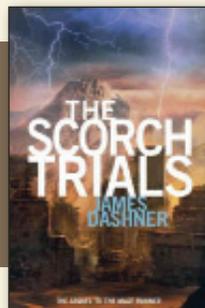
I did. Particularly when I was in elementary school and middle school I wrote lots of short stories. Then I kind of went away from it for a while — you know you get really busy in high school and college. Towards the end of college I got serious about it again and started writing novels.

Question:

**What life events do you think inspired the creativity of your books?**

Answer:

The first thing that pops into my head is the woods. When I was a kid growing up in Georgia, we were surrounded by forests and woods and creeks and my imagination just



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ran wild. I would go play in those woods and pretend I was every movie character and every book character. I think it just fostered and developed my imagination.

Question:

**Are there any of your characters you relate to particularly?**

Answer:

I think my main characters are the ones that are probably most like me because I'm in their head, so I pull things from my real life. I'd say maybe 80% of the time those characters are reacting or thinking or saying what I would. The other 20% of the time they're doing what I wish I would. When they're brave and that kind of stuff, I don't know if I'd actually do it. My main characters – Jimmy Fincher, Atticus Higginbottom and Thomas – so far are the ones I relate most to.

Question:

**Any of those you relate to more than the others?**

Answer:

Probably Atticus, because I just really channeled and tried to remember myself at his age and what it was like. That was the magic time in my life in terms of reading and discovering, so I'm kind of reliving it through him.

Question:

**You were an accountant before you began writing?**

Answer:

Yes, it was my dirty, dark secret.

Question:

**How did you decide to risk all that and jump into writing?**

Answer:

I never really took a huge risk. I didn't quit my job until I had enough money as an advance that I knew I could survive for a while. I mean, it was still a risk because if that ran out... but I could always go back to work if I had to. Accounting was not my cup of tea and I couldn't imagine doing that for the rest of my life, so I really committed to writing. I verbalized to a lot of people--it

was about 2003--that I set a goal to become a full-time writer in 5 years. I just barely made my goal, so it worked.

Question:

**What surprised you about the writing and publishing industry?**

Answer:

How brutal an industry it is. I've had some really lucky breaks; I didn't have a really extended period of struggle that some authors had. I had a few years of it, but I know an author who worked at it for 17 years before he was able to go full time as a writer. I know many writers who never have gone full time, but have struggled just to get published. It is brutal; the vast majority of authors I know make less than \$10,000 a year from their writing, so to be able to do it for a living, and to make a good living, and to support a family, I know how lucky I am. I never, ever take it for granted. It could go away at any second.

Question:

**What's the connection between your movie watching and writing?**

Answer:

It may be the number one thing that helps me. You know, it took me a long time to convince my wife that this is legit, but many times I will just take a break in the middle of the day and see a movie by myself. I see almost every movie that comes out – unless it's just really awful or about princesses, then I'll take my daughter. But in movies, with the visuals and the relatively short time in which an entire story arc is presented and the characters are developed, to me a book and a movie are far more similar than people think. I mean, you are telling a story and you're creating characters. Some of the best writing I've ever done is the hour or two after seeing a movie.

Question:

**Are there any themes that permeate throughout your works?**

Answer:

Yeah, definitely, but the key is I don't do it on purpose. I don't ever write a book thinking, *OK, I'm going to teach this lesson and this*

*lesson*, I think they just naturally come out. Even in the *Maze Runner* trilogy, which is a darker, scarier story, if anything it actually presents even more themes than I've ever included, especially when you see the whole story arc of all three books. There are a lot of themes, like to what extent can you go in making humanity suffer to try to save humanity? It sounds really deep, but you'll understand when you read the third book. What is good and what is evil and what is in between? Things aren't usually black and white. I think the *Maze Runner* trilogy really presents the gray area in all the conflicts it creates between good and evil.

Question:

**What can readers expect from you in the future, after *Maze Runner*?**

Answer:

Well it's funny you ask. I'm about to turn in the third book of the *Maze Runner* and will be done with that, so Random House really wants to set up my next series, whatever it's going to be. The last few weeks my agent and I have narrowed it down to two ideas, and just today he sent those to Random House. I did about a two-page outline for each one, both of which I love, so I'll be devastated either way because one of them I'm not going to write, at least for a while. It'll be two years before anyone sees that because book 3 of the *Maze Runner* will come out fall of 2011, and the first book of this new deal will come out in fall of 2012. It sounds like another lifetime, but it's not that far away. And of course *The 13th Reality* has two more books coming out, too, so that's basically my next few years of life.

Question:

**What are your pie-in-the-sky dreams for your future career?**

Answer:

Probably my pie-in-the-sky dream is movies. *The Maze Runner* has been optioned [to become a feature film] and the studios seem very excited about it, so it really could happen. That would be my ultimate dream, especially if it's done well. If it's not done well, that'll stink. I'd also like to get involved more. I mean, I just love movies, so I'd

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eventually want to write screenplays. I'd love to write an original screenplay, not just a screenplay based off my book. That's my ultimate goal. I'll always write books, but I want to get involved in movies.



James Dashner is a bestselling young adult author. His ninth book, *The Scorch Trials*, came out in October 2010. The book reached the New York Times Bestseller list.

James sat down for this interview with library staff on July 20, 2010 following a Teen Summer Reading event he highlighted.