

(culture)

# FLIGHT OF FANTASY

**INTERNING WITH A BOOK AGENT HELPED UK WRITER SAMANTHA SHANNON LAUNCH HER SERIES ON THE WORLD. VANESSA KEYS TALKS TO THE RISING STAR**

**O**n May 6 last year, 21-year-old Samantha Shannon woke to find her name splashed across the front page of the *Mail Online* (the *Daily Mail's* provocative website). There, sandwiched between hysterical political coverage and a revolving gallery of near-nude reality stars, was a grainy headshot of Shannon accompanied by the headline, "Is this the new J.K. Rowling?" Once news had broken that Shannon, then 20, had just signed a six-figure book deal with Bloomsbury for *The Bone Season*, the first novel in a seven-part series set in a dystopian world, the comparison game commenced. Stephenie Meyer, Suzanne Collins, even E.L. James analogies were thrown into the mix.

"That was the worst," groans Shannon, momentarily burying her face in her hands. "I was mortified when the press started printing all these things that just weren't true. Someone reported it was a million-dollar book deal. Another paper said my mum had crushed my dreams, when all I said was she controlled my writing hours. It portrayed her as a tyrant who tried to stop me getting published, which obviously isn't true," she says.

In person, sitting opposite her in Bloomsbury's cosy London headquarters, Shannon is every bit as sagacious and self-possessed as you'd expect an Oxford graduate turned franchise fantasy author to be. Unequivocally frank, she's not shy about discussing her success, nor dishing the dirt on her sobering early experience with the press. "It shocked me, actually, that news could change so quickly," she says. "It was very exciting and I got a lot of attention, but not being able to control what people say about you is quite frightening."

While the past six months have been free of press attention, Shannon is set to be thrust into the spotlight once more when *The Bone Season* goes on sale in the UK, US and Australia on August 20. Described by Shannon's publisher as "*Beauty and the Beast* written with the imagination of the Brontë sisters," the book is set in Britain in 2059 and follows 19-year-old Paige Mahoney, a clairvoyant whose rare gift constantly endangers her life. Paige is a member of the clairvoyant underworld, created in response to a repressive government party called Scion, a race of super-beings whose mission is to root out clairvoyance.

The idea came to Shannon in the summer of 2011 when interning with well-known London book agent David Godwin. "The novel I'd been writing since I was 15, *Aurora*, had been rejected by every agent I sent it to and I thought, 'Well, if I can't be an author, maybe I can still work with books,'" recalls Shannon. "David was the only agent who gave me actual feedback on *Aurora*. He didn't want to represent me, but he took the time to write back and give me some notes and I asked him on the off-chance if there were any places for an internship and he said yes."

The internship not only gave Shannon the opportunity to sift through the slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts and see what worked and what didn't, it introduced her to a slice of London life she never knew existed. Godwin's office was located on Monmouth Street in the Seven Dials area of London's West End, an intersection made up of seven cobblestoned streets that radiate from a central sundial dating back to 1690. "It's such a gem," says Shannon. "You feel like you'd never know about it unless you stumbled upon it. It's got a real old-world feel."

At first, she didn't notice the clairvoyant shops sneakily nestled in between quaint Italian eateries and brow bars. "One day I came up with the idea of clairvoyants and, looking back and reflecting, I think I did subconsciously register the shops and they must have stuck in my head," says Shannon. "I remember I ran straight out in my lunchbreak and bought this horrible notebook and started scribbling down ideas for clairvoyant types. Paige's voice came to me so quickly and so naturally. I'd never written in first person before, so I just threw myself into it and hoped it was right. I went into it completely blind."

Shannon worked solidly on the manuscript for six months before showing it to a visiting professor at Oxford, who recommended she send it to an agent. "I was in tears afterwards," she says. "I was so happy that someone actually said my writing was any good." Shannon sent the manuscript to Godwin, who took the book to the London Book Fair, where Bloomsbury bid against a number of publishers before winning the rights to the first three books with a six-figure advance. Rights have already been sold in more than 20 countries and the film rights optioned by Andy Serkis's production studio, The Imaginarium.

Shannon hopes when *The Bone Season* makes its debut, people will talk about the book rather than about her. "There were all these initial comparisons to J.K. Rowling, which was completely absurd," she says. "No one had even read the book at that stage, so it came from someone comparing the deals, not the writing. But, of course, that went out of control and people thought it was a comparison between the two books."

She stops suddenly and looks out of the window, watching the wind attack the umbrellas of passers-by. "I mean, the next J.K. Rowling? No one even knows what it means," says Shannon. "How does one become the next J.K. Rowling, anyway?" I suggest it's simply human nature to make



**“I WROTE 60,000 WORDS OF BOOK TWO, HATED IT, DELETED IT AND STARTED AGAIN”**



PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW LLOYD. ILLUSTRATION: NUMASKULL

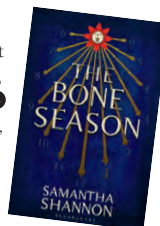
comparisons and she agrees, adding, “It can be hard to be cast in someone’s shadow like that. I mean, I’m so grateful for the advance press because more people know about the book, but I don’t want to appear as a challenger to Rowling, because it’s crazy to imagine that any book will ever do as well as *Harry Potter*.”

Shannon’s now writing the second book in *The Bone Season* series, a process with more speed bumps than book one. “I wrote about 60,000 words and decided I hated it, so I deleted it and started again,” she says. “It was written when I was editing *The Bone Season*, so there were a lot of inconsistencies and to be honest, it wasn’t my best writing. You don’t want people saying, ‘Oh, this one’s really weak compared to the first one.’ I have to be quite tough on myself.”

Our time up, Shannon describes her journey home: the Tube to the end of the line, where her father will pick her up and drive to the family home in Hatfield, a small town just north of London, in Hertfordshire. Tonight she’ll write some more, maybe do some reading. When I ask her what she does to relax, she looks sheepish. “That’s pretty much it,” she says. “I read and I write. Though I’ve been staring at a blank screen a lot lately. I keep looking at the manuscript for the first book and thinking, ‘Gosh, how did I fill that out?’”

*The Bone Season* (Bloomsbury, \$29.99) is out on Tuesday.

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