

The Toronto Star

Where trolls live under the ACC; Comedian's new youth novel envisions Toronto as a truly fantastic place

Fri Aug 14 2009
Page: E10
Section: Entertainment
Byline: Vit Wagner
Source: Toronto Star

Illustrations: Sarah Dea toronto star Onstage or on the page, stand-up comic novelist Sean Cullen says he refuses to dumb it down.

Sean Cullen sticks to the same fundamental approach, whether he's working a room full of raucous, boozy adults in his familiar role as a stand-up comedian or pursuing his sideline as a successful author of novels for young readers.

"I never dumb down what I do," says Cullen, who has just launched a second series of fantasy novels while continuing to mine the profile earned as a runner-up last year on NBC's Last Comic Standing.

"When I was doing Last Comic Standing, my stuff was really weird and surreal. I didn't win because I'm not doing jokes about drinking and dating and stuff. But the people who get it love it.

"It's the same with the books. I try not to talk down to the kids. I don't know if I'm writing any differently than I would for an adult audience. There are certain differences in terms of subject matter and stuff like that, but the overall principle is the same. I want to tell an entertaining story with lots of surprises and comedy."

Cullen's *The Prince of Neither Here Nor There* is the first in a projected series of titles about young Brendan, who discovers he hails from the supernatural world of fairies, trolls, dwarves and the like.

It follows a trilogy launched in 2006 with *Hamish X* and the *Cheese Pirates*. (Hamish and Brendan are also the names of Cullen's sons from two different marriages.)

The Prince of Neither Here Nor There is pitched at readers ages 11 and up, while the *Hamish* books targeted a younger audience. Another difference is that the new novel makes the most of a Toronto setting where trolls dwell under the Air Canada Centre and Ward's Island assumes magical properties.

"I have an Irish background and I've always been interested in fairies and leprechauns and that kind of stuff. I wanted to do a modern take on it," says Cullen, who divides his time between Toronto and Los Angeles. "I love the idea that there's a world inside our world or a parallel world that our perception does not allow us to see."

Cullen is determined to assume the most of his readers, producing novels of a substantial length, littered with interjections by an off-stage narrator. The latest one contains 82 footnotes, including this helpful definition of "sadist": "A person who enjoys

inflicting pain. See also: Mathematics Teacher."

"I wanted to have a way to change the point of view," says Cullen of the footnotes. "When I do comedy, I pull from different things all the time. When I'm writing, it's hard to be extemporaneous or spontaneous within that rigid format."

The first *Hamish* book was a finalist for B.C.'s Red Cedar Book Award, voted on by young readers, so Cullen can count on that and decent sales numbers for confirmation his approach is hitting the mark.

"With comedy, the response is immediate. You know right away if it's working or if the audience hates you and wants you to get off the stage. Writing is absolutely the opposite. You don't know if you are doing anything right. You just have to trust that you're doing something interesting."

© 2009 Torstar Corporation