



AN INTERVIEW WITH COSTA BOOK AWARD SHORTLISTED DARREN CHARLTON

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Created Dec '20

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[245](#) [2]

Article Category:

Featured author

Byline:

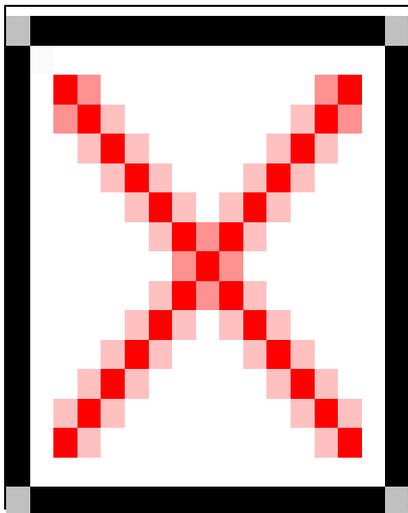
John McLay meets **Darren Charlton**, author of **Wranglestone**.

*Darren Charlton's debut book **Wranglestone***

was published just as the pandemic swept the country, and could have been overlooked, until this year's

***Costa Children's Book Award** [3]*

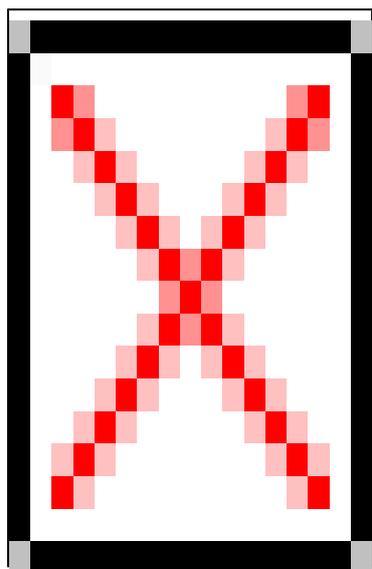
*judges selected it for their shortlist. In this first feature on the four authors on the Costa shortlist, **John Mclay**, himself a **Costa** judge, interviews **Darren Charlton** for **Books for Keeps**.*



The first thing I say to author Darren Charlton when he pops up on screen, even before I congratulate him about his shortlisting for the **2020 Costa Children's Book Award** is? where's the hat? In the only picture of Darren I know, he is wearing a cowboy hat. The Stetson nods towards his love of the American wild west and the National Parks he came to love on a number of previous visits over the years. These landscapes were to be part of the inspiration for his debut YA novel, **Wranglestone**, which Little Tiger published in early 2020. The book, you could say, became another casualty of the first UK lockdown when bookshops closed and debut voices found it so hard to rise in the rush of book buyers who kept on buying books? but only if they knew about them already.

The hat, he tells me on his first-ever Zoom call, is in storage for the time being as Darren prepares to move house back to his home town of Hastings. After a tough year for everyone, and some personal upheaval, the **Costa** shortlisting has been a revelation for this author who had begun to doubt if his creativity could still have an outlet. ?It's huge for me,?

Darren says about the **Costa** recognition. "Immeasurable. As a debut you have a fear that you are going to arrive into complete obscurity. I always sensed, with this book, that I was driving towards giving the market something that might not exist yet. That it might not gain any traction."



Wranglestone, rest assured, is wholly original. A sweet, tender love story between two teenage boys set against a post-apocalyptic zombie apocalypse. With a Wild West frontier feel. I liked it so much it reminded me of another great book - [Grasshopper Jungle](#) [4] by Andrew Smith - which was *three* love-torn teenagers and an *insect* invasion apocalypse. Equally electrifyingly original.

I was lucky - **Wranglestone** came out three weeks before Lockdown and I got a launch, to sign copies and to walk around bookstores. Now, thinking that I had a book out in February feels like it is either a memory from another lifetime or that it never actually happened. This nomination has rescued my book and is giving it another chance to find readers. I'm so grateful. Emotionally, I've been lifted out of the car crash of this year. It's also made me not just drop the reins of what my future aspirations of writing may be. It's really touched me."

Darren, in his own words, had a "really lame acting career in his 20's" before he realized his writing ambitions. "I loved acting and was probably at my happiest. The big regret I have is that I turned my back on being a creative person. I went to work in social care but three or four years in I realized that I was miserable not being creative when it was obvious that that was what I should be doing in my life. I went hiking and camping in the National Parks in America back in 2007 and I was just so inspired. It was the frustration of not having a creative outlet. I didn't just want that to be a hobby - I knew professionally I needed to be a creative person. Again. The trip to America was very transformative. It was the chief inspiration for **Wranglestone**. I started writing privately as a result of that first trip."

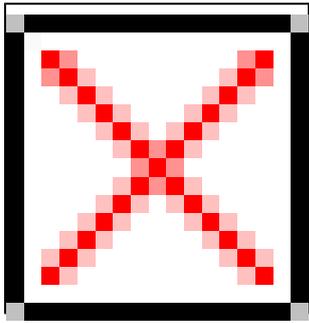
I ask Darren if he has bottom drawers full of unpublished writings that came before he began work on the book that would turn out to be **Wranglestone**. "Peter, in this novel, was by and large the protagonist in something else I was playing around with, though I no longer have a copy of it. I met my agent with a completely different manuscript, but it had no commercial prospects. I pitched the idea of **Wranglestone** to her with a photo of a little hut on a lake and the hook of a lake freezing so that the dead could cross, and she took me on. Then I had to write it. Structurally it was really hard and I loved writing it but it took a lot of drafts. I was working full-time and it was written over two or three years."

Getting **Wranglestone** published in the first place was not straightforward. "Every other publisher passed on it," says Darren. "The book was met with all levels of fear about whether or not it was commercial or not. I wondered if its gay love story was just not part of the normal narratives that publishers are still really comfortable with. Are they struggling? Are they being bullied? Are they coming out? No, they are not doing any of that. They are just living and having the kind of adventures that boys and girls are having in other novels. With the boys it was a conscience decision to not have any of the usual tropes."

?I don't think of the book as a horror novel, either. I never wanted it considered as that. I do love zombies, especially in their origins, and more in science fiction like **I Am Legend**. I think I wanted to rescue them and take them back to that allegory for sections of society like Romero did in the sixties.?

?I wanted to put something out in the world for teenagers, especially gay and LGBTQ kids to just go ? you *can* have a life and it can be happy. There's enough out there already that can tell them otherwise.?

Fans of **Wranglestone** will be pleased to know that the first draft of a sequel is, technically, written. However, the author has a strong idea of what he wants from it and where it is still going to go. With a fair wind we might see that published in 2021. Before then, however, is the announcement of the **Costa** winner in January. Darren Charlton has a lot of fans hoping it will be his fantastic book that gets the ultimate prize.



John McLay is a literary scout for children's books with clients in both international publishing and film. He co-founded the **Bath Festival of Children's Literature** with his wife Gill in 2007 and currently runs a children's book event venture called **Events of Wonder**. He is also an author, anthologist and book reviewer.

Wranglestone by Darren Charlton is published by Little Tiger, 978-1788951210, £6.99 pbk.

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Source URL (retrieved on Apr '21): <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245/childrens-books/articles/featured-author/an-interview-with-costa-book-award-shortlisted-da>

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