



FANTASTIC JOURNEY

Eoin Colfer has turned a lifelong love of Celtic fantasy and offbeat humour into his hugely successful series of *Artemis Fowl* novels for children. Now he has created a one-man stage show that explores the origins of his frenzied underworld. By **Philip Watson**.
Photograph by **Eva Vermandel**

Eoin Colfer is pacing around the stage at the Wexford Arts Centre in south-east Ireland. Although he is best known as a children's author and the creator of the wildly popular series of *Artemis Fowl* novels, Colfer has had a long association with this particular theatre. His father was on the board in the 1970s, his mother has acted in plays on this stage, and Eoin (pronounced Owen) had small parts in many productions here as a child. In the late 1980s, when he was working as a teacher, it was also at this theatre that he began to direct plays he had written, casting them with his friends and building a popular local following. 'I spent many happy, sweaty hours behind the back curtain, peeking out at the action on stage,' he says.

In two days' time, however, his presence at this venue will be rather more leading man than backstage drama-turge. To mark the publication of his fifth bestselling fantasy adventure, *Artemis Fowl and the Lost Colony*,

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Colfer will host an evening of storytelling and humour, with music provided by his younger brother, Niall.

It is an event that perfectly symbolises Eoin Colfer's dramatic change in fame and fortune in recent years. Six years ago he was a special-needs teacher at a primary school in Wexford, and wrote children's books in his spare time. He had achieved some success with three novels for teenagers and three picture books for younger children, but sales were modest and almost entirely restricted to Ireland. His renown was local, at best. Today, Colfer is one of the world's most successful children's authors. His *Artemis Fowl* series has been hailed often (if lazily) as the new Harry Potter, and has sold more than eight million copies in 35 countries. Colfer's sales in the UK and Ireland alone are estimated at two million. Almost all the *Artemis Fowl* novels have been bestsellers in the children's book charts in Britain and the US; the *Lost Colony* went straight to number one on its day of publication, knocking Anthony Horowitz's *Stormbreaker* from the top slot and staying there for four weeks.

Film rights for the first *Artemis Fowl* story were optioned in 2000 by Miramax for £350,000. (Colfer has recently finished a treatment for the film with the director Jim Sheridan; a 2008 release is scheduled.) Two years later, Colfer signed another film and book deal with Miramax for £1 million.

His book readings have proved so popular with children and adults that he has expanded them into a one-and-a-half-hour stage show that mixes family photographs and foibles and stand-up comedy to explain the genesis of his



books and characters. The show has toured major Irish and British regional theatres, and this month runs for 10 performances in London's West End.

The widespread appeal of the books is largely down to one crucial and clever subversion: Colfer has taken the often fey and fanciful fairy world of leprechauns, pixies and goblins and rendered it dark, dangerous, high-tech and funny. Inspired by traditional Irish hero legends and storytelling ('Our well of mythology runs deep – we are steeped in shape-shifting and magical folklore,' he says), and by a range of more contemporary influences including Batman comics, *Father Ted*, *Star Wars*, and 1980s American TV cop shows (Anthony Horowitz described the books as 'Hans Christian Andersen meets *Miami Vice*'), Colfer has created a frenzied underworld full of a fascinating cast of characters who are by turns streetwise and sarcastic, moral and loyal, greedy and psychotic.

There is Captain Holly Short, a brave and feisty elf who is the first female member of the elite Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance division, or LEPrecon; Mulch Diggums, a kleptomaniac, earth-eating dwarf with uncontrollable flatulence; and Foaly, a paranoid centaur, inventor and technophile who resembles Q in the James Bond stories. There is also, vitally, our eponymous protagonist who (at the start of the series at least) is a cold-hearted, 12-year-old criminal mastermind, protean genius and all-round amoral anti-hero living in a large manor house near Dublin.

Famously labelling the books as '*Die Hard* with fairies', Colfer loads his action-packed plot lines with shoot-outs, adventures and mesmerising magic that includes the powers of flight, invisibility and time travel. The technologically advanced fairies possess gadgetry and weaponry that chime perfectly with the computer games, graphic novels, cartoon series and action movies so beloved by Colfer's mostly 10- to 14-year-old audience. His energetic style and quick-fire dialogue also add to the zing – one critic described it as sounding 'like your best friend talking urgently about things more exciting than you've ever dreamed'.

The jokes help too, whether they are knowingly cringe-tastic puns such as a doctor of psychology named C Njall DeMencha and a mineral water named Derrier ('You know how they put the bubbles in this stuff,' snorts Mulch Diggums), or the

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plethora of jokes about bum flaps, dwarf gas and digestive explosions. 'There are always five to 10 fart gags in each book,' says Colfer, who is now sitting sipping tea in the arts centre cafe. 'Although it would be 20 if it wasn't for my editor.'

Colfer is certainly prolific. As well as the Artemis Fowl stories, he has written a book about a 'half-pint schoolboy and fully qualified private investigator' named Fletcher Moon, and a fantasy called *The Supernaturalist* that involves an orphaned boy being rescued by a crew of children with special psychic abilities. He has also penned two illustrated tales for younger readers, an Artemis Fowl short story, and an adult crime story published in an anthology called *Dublin Noir*.

While the explosion in children's literature brought about by the phenomenal success of JK Rowling has undoubtedly helped him, Colfer's success is rooted in and influenced by an intriguingly diverse range of sources. His parents placed

an important emphasis on creativity and industry. Colfer's mother, Noreen, was a respected amateur actor who went on to become a drama teacher, writer, poet, women's group organiser and the mother of five boys (Eoin, 41, is the second). Billy, his father, was a primary school teacher who also found time to be an artist, sportsman, diver and a historian of international renown, and who also built the family house and boat.

'My brothers and I all got the creative bug from our parents,' Colfer says. He is a quiet, private and modest person, and occasionally softly spoken to the point of inaudibility. 'From an early age we were encouraged to read, paint and make things, and I still don't feel comfortable today just sitting

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in front of the television or wasting time. To me, as a child, it never seemed unusual to want to write stories or books. It was only later that I discovered that this was in any way unusual.'

Short, skinny and unsporty as a child (these attributes have stayed with him), Colfer developed an early love of Irish history and Celtic fantasy. (The Artemis Fowl books are a testament to this; they are rich with references to such sites as 'the ring of Tara – possibly the most magical place on Earth' and 'Éiríú, the land where time began'.) He and his brother Paul were also obsessed with fairy drawings and would spend many painstaking hours tracing the Celtic pop-art creations for 1970s album covers by bands such as Thin Lizzy and Meat Loaf. 'I know it might seem a little geeky and girly, but they were actually drawings of tough and violent fairies wielding axes,' he says, laughing. 'And all the women were beautiful and wore diaphanous gowns. It was art and culture to us.'

Even his upbringing in Wexford may have inspired his creativity. For a small town, Wexford has a big cultural reputation; it is the venue for a long-running opera festival and the birthplace of such writers as the Man Booker prize-winning novelist John Banville and the playwright Billy Roche. The town is like Glyndebourne crossed with Hay-on-Wye. 'The artistic life of the city is very strong and it was easy to immerse myself in it,' Colfer says. 'I lived in Dublin when I was training to be a teacher, and my wife and I lived abroad for a few years, but all our family and friends are here and I've always wanted to come back to Wexford. I'm not really a bright lights, big city person.'

But it was his 15 years as a teacher that most acutely honed his ability to communicate with and enthuse children. Colfer spent eight years at a primary school in Wexford, took a four-year career break teaching in Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Italy, then returned to take up a new post as a resources and learning support teacher at his previous school. While this last job involved giving children anything from breakfast to long-term emotional support, Colfer says he always found time to teach Irish mythology. 'I'd start telling the historical stories and I would find myself streamlining or elaborating the details if I saw the interest flagging,' he says. 'I'd add gory bits and decapitations, and in the end I compiled my own book of legends and cycles. From there it was a short step to the Artemis Fowl books; I just decided to give them a technological spin. I also tried to emulate the way my father used humour as a teaching method, so that kids don't realise they're learning.'

He retired reluctantly from teaching in 2001 after the success of the first two Artemis Fowl novels meant that he was spending up to five months a year on the road, attending readings, signings and book festivals. It is not, however, the only way his life has been transformed. In the past few years, Colfer has progressed from being a committed fan of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories to writing an introduction to a collected American edition of them. He has appeared on *Blue Peter*; watched a contestant answer questions on his books on *Junior Mastermind* ('He got eight right; I got five'); met such heroes as Bono and David Gilmour from Pink Floyd ('I was completely flabbergasted and said to him, brilliantly, "You're Dave Gilmour," and he said, "I know."').

One of a rare coterie of millionaire writers, he now also has enough money for his family – he has two sons, Finn, nine, and Seán, three – and his extended family to be comfortable for the rest of their lives. Living in Ireland, he does not pay tax on his book earnings, but he does donate generously to charity. He has recently bought a large farmhouse near Wexford, the renovation of which is being overseen by his architect brother Donal. In the meantime, he and his family are living near Vence in the south of France for a year.

He owns, he tells me sheepishly, an Audi A4 Cabriolet ('I've taken the roof down four times in two years'), but there is absolutely nothing pretentious about Eoin Colfer. He can be seen at book events wearing a black leather jacket, but it's hard to imagine him dyeing his grey hair or running off with a blonde bombshell 20 years his junior. 'If I'd been 22 when all this happened I could have been affected by it I suppose, but I was 35 and married

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with a kid and a mortgage,' he says. 'I was a bit old to be preening, and if I did start to tattoo my name on my arm or something, I'd soon get to hear about it. I try to keep a low profile and be the same person. About the most uppity I get is when I use the line, "You'll have to talk to my agent".'

One line he enjoys saying is when people ask what he does: 'I reply that I'm a writer, and I just love that sentence.' You get the feeling that he is deeply moved and rewarded by the reaction he gets to his books. 'Kids have a much more intense relationship with the books they enjoy reading than they do when they're adults, and I remember that relationship, so I understand and appreciate that I'm in a privileged position,' he says.

While it's true that more and more girls are reading the Artemis Fowl series, as many as 70 per cent of his readers are boys. Far from being a disadvantage, Colfer says he is greatly reassured by this. 'When I was a teacher, one of my goals was to try to encourage boys to read more,' he says. 'And I get letters from parents who tell me that they tried everything to get their sons to read – and now they're reading the Artemis Fowl books. That's the best kind of feedback I can get because you feel you've influenced young people to read. It's like giving them a gift for the rest of their lives.'

'Artemis Fowl and the Lost Colony' (Puffin) is available for £11.99 plus £1.25 p&p from Telegraph Books (0870-428 4112). *'Artemis Fowl: Fairies, Fiends and Flatulence, Eoin Colfer Live'* is at Trafalgar Studios, Whitehall, London SW1, from October 21-29 (0870-060 6632)