Unfortunately, Lemony Snicket, er, Daniel Handler ends his beloved series with 'The End'

by Arthur Salm

Lemony Snicket's name is on the spines, and the title pages list him as the author, but in a recent telephone interview novelist Daniel Handler explained, sort of, that he's not, really. Lemony Snicket is just the narrator, according to Handler, who cashes the royalty checks and thus, one can only assume, actually writes the books. Handler also makes personal appearances on Snicket's behalf. But he remains cagey about exactly who, or what, Lemony Snicket is. His explanation makes sense, up to a point, then gets vague. He maintains, for example, that Snicket is neither a nom de plume nor a persona he sometimes inhabits.

"He is the narrator of a certain collection of books," Handler said, "and I thought it would be interesting to publish them under the name of the narrator rather than under the name of the author. Although it's sort of a shtick to say that I'm the personal representative of Lemony Snicket, that's actually fairly accurate.

"There is such a person. He's just fictional. Which would be one reason why he never shows up."

You wouldn't want to be a member of the Baudelaire family. Bad things, one after another, keep happening to them. A series of unfortunate events, you might say. It's not as if Lemony Snicket didn't warn you. In "The Bad eginning" (1999), the first of 13 volumes that are called, with something that approaches understatement, "A Series of Unfortunate Events," Snicket tells readers -- children, supposedly, but that's not quite how things turned out -- to expect nothing but misery and woe, and then some.

The Lemony Snicket books, as they have come to be known, are a literary phenomenon on the order of "Harry Potter" -- if an order of monetary magnitude below. Somewhere around 25 million copies of the first 12 books have been sold, and Friday the 13th marked the publication of "The End," the 13th and final episode in the series chronicling the miserable lives of Violet, Klaus and Sunny, the three Baudelaire orphans, and their nemesis, Count Olaf.

(Jim Carrey played Count Olaf in the movie, "A Series of Unfortunate Events," which covered the unfortunate events that take place in the first few Unfortunate Events.) Snicket is forever telling readers, Brer Rabbit-like, that there are any number of more pleasant books available, and advising them that it might be best to put down this book immediately.

Oh, yeah - that'll keep the kids away.

But it's not just kids who are drawn to the series. Like the Harry Potter books, many adults eagerly read along with, and likely ahead of, their children. It doesn't hurt that Handler talks down to no one, peppering the book with characters like Esm Squalor (a joke for J.D. Salinger fans) and establishments like the Hotel Denouement.

Asked how he manages to make his work accessible to both children and adults, without boring the bejabbers out of -- or insulting the intelligence of -- either group, or anyone in between, Handler professed to be mystified himself.

"I have no idea," he said. "I just try to write the best story I can. I didn't imagine that anyone would be interested at any age, so it's been quite a shock. ... And one of the subshocks is that the age range of the readers has been much wider than anyone expected. There are children as young as 5 to 6 having these books read to them, while the upper range seems to be governed only by mortality."

As successful as the Lemony Snicket books have been, Handler seems determined not to be defined by them. He is also the author of three well-regarded adult novels, "Watch Your Mouth," "The Basic Eight" and, earlier this year, "Adverbs," a collection of interrelated stories, each with an adverb for a title: "Soundly," "Briefly," "Truly," "Obviously," etc. It sounds like a gimmick, and it is, but it comes off beautifully, and it's a touching and -- Handler being Handler -- frequently hilarious work.

Told that no less an eminence than Elmore Leonard has declared war on adverbs, Handler returned refined fire.

"I actually think when people like Elmore Leonard are opposed to adverbs," he said, "what they really oppose is overwritten, flowery prose for the sake of itself. Which is also not necessarily a philosophy I share."

Handler is himself, occasionally, a semi-unhinged fan. One of his New Year's resolutions, he said, was to reread 20 novels "of the nonclassic variety, just because there were all these novels that I read that I remember really liking, that sit on my bookshelf and that I recommend to people. But it occurred to me that they're really wonderful novels to reread. Not 'Madame Bovary,' but one of the Alice Munro novels, say. It was delightful to

see that some of them were just as good as I remembered, and some were better."

And he dives giddily (adverb) off the deep end when it comes to California novelist Tom Drury.

"His second novel, 'The Black Brook,' is one of my favorite novels of all time. I long to write him a mash note. (He writes) beautifully sentence by sentence, but it doesn't have the cumulative weight of being irritating, as many things that are beautiful sentence by sentence have -- I won't say any names. Michael Ondaatje.

"That's what I love about Drury -- that you can tape one sentence over your desk and stare at it, and you can do that with so many of his sentences, yet there's nothing precious about it. It just feels gorgeous. I was just in a bookstore in Seattle, and I noticed that he had a new novel out ('The Driftless Area') that I had been waiting for. It made me squeal like a schoolgirl."

As for a new series, by Handler or Snicket or whomever: "Yes, there's always a possibility. There are other things I'll be working on both for children and for adults. But readers should not expect Volume 1 of something next year. I'm of the belief that one has to go away before one can come back."

Copley News Service

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