

Exclusive Interview: “The Only Song Worth Singing” Author Randee Dawn

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Watch enough episodes of *Behind The Music* and you quickly learn that

terrible things can happen when a band goes on tour.

But I must've missed the episode in which a band's tour go awry because of creatures from Irish folklore.

In the following email interview, author and rock journalist Randee Dawn talks about *The Only Song Worth Singing* ([paperback < https://amzn.to/3RGrDhL>](https://amzn.to/3RGrDhL) , [Kindle < https://amzn.to/3EeMWUz>](https://amzn.to/3EeMWUz)), in which an Irish band bring some unruly guests with them on their first U.S. tour.



To start, what is *The Only Song Worth Singing* about, and when and where does it take place?

The Only Song Worth Singing is about three best friends who've known each other and played music together since they were kids — and are now in a rock band on their first tour in the U.S. in the mid-1990s. But some of the hangers-on on the tour turn out to be creatures straight out of Irish mythology, who proceed to turn their lives upside down, inside out, and backward, with potentially deadly consequences.

Where did you get the idea for *The Only Song Worth Singing*, and how different is the finished story from what you originally conceived?

When *The Only Song Worth Singing* came to mind, I was doing two things: taking a course in college about folklore around the world (with professor Elie Wiesel, no less), and interviewing a lot of bands as a freelance entertainment journalist. I came across a book of collected Irish fairy and folklore assembled by another Nobel Prize winner, W.B. Yeats (the poet who gave us “The Second Coming,” among many other things). In between the stories, Yeats categorized a number of “types” of Irish fairies — Trooping, Solitary — and mentioned ones I'd never heard of, including the *leanhaun sídhe* (the fairy mistress). (In the book we use *leannan sídhe*, which seems to be the more modern spelling.) The fairy mistress inspires the poets, but also saps their life at the same time, which is why poets die young. I thought, “Well, who are the modern poets I care about? Rock musicians! So what if...” and the story took over from there.

The final version isn't all that far off from what I originally wrote, though as I've become a better author it's more streamlined, punchier, and has more background texture. One significant addition was including a back story for our fairy mistress, and intertwining it with a character who isn't named as Yeats, but essentially is Yeats. There's some controversy among folklorists as to whether Yeats fictionalized some of his contributions to folklore, and I wanted to suggest that perhaps a talented poet could possibly have been so powerful as to write a new fairy into existence. (Hey, if you clap and believe, Tinkerbell comes back to life — belief is a huge factor in fairy stories in general.) Why not Yeats?

You kind of already answered this, but is there a reason you decided to add an element of fantasy into this story as opposed to just having it be a fictional account of an Irish band on their first tour of the U.S.?

The fantastical elements could have been more implied than made clear (and there's at least one magical creature who is never seen but whose efforts are very much felt), but I don't think this book would have worked without the fantastical element. Magical realism might have made for a lighter touch, but I don't really think of myself as a literary writer. I love character and plot above the rest, and mostly I wanted to tell a good ripping yarn. Besides, people have written about rock bands on the road plenty of times. There are a lot fewer tales where you get scary Irish fairies.

Also, while we're on the subject, is there a reason they're an Irish band on their first U.S. tour as opposed to an American

band on their first tour of Ireland or some other combination of countries?

One thing great stories and good authors do is put their protagonists in the places they least want to be. That's how you generate conflict and story.

For me, I wanted to put my band in a place where they were isolated, surrounded only by people who were paid to be there, and fully reliant on themselves. As it was the 1990s, they didn't even have smart phones or the Internet to connect them back home. When I interviewed bands in the 1990s from the UK, some members didn't even have phones in their homes — you had to use a public call box. Different world. So having an American band on tour in America wouldn't have been as isolating.

I might have sent Americans to the UK or Ireland or elsewhere, but my familiarity is with the indie music scene in the 1990s. I've been to nearly every one of the venues I feature in the article; I know what the publicity scene was like, and how backstage events functioned. I don't have the muscle or actual memory to know what that was like in other countries, so to keep things grounded around all the fantasy, I stuck to what I knew.

Finally, the fairies in the story are pulled from Irish folklore — so the characters needed to have some connection to that (particularly Patrick). It all folded together in the right order, in the end.

As I alluded to earlier, *The Only Song Worth Singing* sounds like it's

a fantasy story. Is that how you'd describe it?

Definitely fantasy. But the best description is dark, contemporary (a.k.a. “urban”) fantasy. I’ve written funny fantasy before, and this book *could* have been funny, but things get pretty dire and dark toward the end for at least one character, and another has his entire identity rewritten. But mostly I wanted to hopefully walk the line in taking the lives of musicians on tour a little more seriously. Musicians in books, movies and TV are usually written as walking stereotypes, with one middle finger in the air and — as Billy Joel put it, a spoon up their nose. The men and women I spoke to were largely young, earnest, and — aside from their bandmates, who they could be pretty sick of after weeks on the road — pretty isolated. The stereotype is parties until dawn post-show; the reality (for me anyway) were long talks until dawn in lobbies and hotel rooms. Certainly, drinking and stunts and shenanigans. But mostly, there was a huge need to connect — and I felt that would make it a much stronger story.

***The Only Song Worth Singing* is not your first book. Are there any authors, or specific stories, that had a big influence on *Singing* but not on anything else you’ve written?**

I’m a great admirer of Jonathan Carroll, an American writer who lives in Vienna and writes magical realism books. He is so insightful, so precise in his words, that I have felt personally reached out to with some of his phrasing. He writes in a slightly-elevated humanistic approach that feels very, very real — and then throws in something like a talking dog *and it all makes sense*. I aspire to be as good as he is. That balancing act is what I’d like to achieve.

The truth is, though, that my earliest drafts of *Only Song* were written in something of a vacuum — I wasn't a real fantasy reader, and hadn't heard of "urban fantasy," as it was called when I first started writing, until after I had my drafts done. I do know that my earliest writings were influenced by Stephen King — less so for content than in the way he put the reader into his characters' heads in his first books and stories.

How about such non-literary influences as movies, TV shows, or games? Was *The Only Song Worth Singing* influenced by any of those things?

Only Song was influenced mainly by my experiences as a music journalist, talking to bands and going out on the tour bus (occasionally) with them. Certain bands and their experiences absolutely fed into my characters; the feelings I had as a twentysomething going to really amazing live shows are also in the book, too. Thing is, an amazing live show, shared with hundreds or thousands, is about as close as we get to actual, real magic in this world. That may sound corny, but I think anyone who's been to a show by a true performer or an incredibly tight band can feel the world being elevated, even if only for a couple of hours.

Now, my understanding is that *The Only Song Worth Singing* is the first book in a series called *Stories From The Green Place*, and that the second book, *Leave No Trace* < <https://amzn.to/4iASRBL> >, will be out August 19th. First, what is the *Stories From The Green Place* about?

Only Song and *Leave No Trace* were written independently of one another, and are stand-alones. *But* they both refer to characters visiting “The Green Place,” which is just a colloquial name for the land of the fae.

At this exact moment, the direction I hope to take a third and (expected) final novel is still mostly in my head, and would be in the more distant future. *Only Song* is the 1990s, *Leave No Trace* would take place in our near future, and the third one would be perhaps another twenty or thirty years down the road, and would tie things together.





And then what is *Leave No Trace* about, and when and where does it take place in relation to *The Only Song Worth Singing*?

The backdrop for *Leave No Trace* is that there's a war raging in Northern Europe, the Celtic countries between fae and humans fae lands are mysteriously disappearing, and the creatures have nowhere to go. But the focus of the story is not in that war — it takes place when three separate stories converge: a young woman who has grown up in the forest because her father wanted to take her away from the “sick” world, the Ghillie Dhu (“Man Of The Forest”) Scots-Gaelic creature she's befriended, and a trio of tourists: two foster-sibling musicians and their manager, who has first-hand experience in the war that's going on. When these groups collide, it wakes up the fae, who try to recruit everyone to help end the war that's going on. (There's also an important mythical bear named Artio.)

It is also a full stand-alone, and other than the fact that everyone visits The Green Place at one point, there's no direct connection to *Only Song*

(though the band of the first book is referred to obliquely).

And, as you said, *Stories From The Green Place* is a three book series...

I think if the third book didn't get written, the two books that are coming out in 2025 would stand just fine on their own. I don't imagine there's a third beyond this. But there are several short stories I've already published that are of the world of *The Green Place*; for example, a story called "Can't Find My Way Home" is about the manager during his war days. "Rough Beast, Slouching," is a side story featuring the antagonist of *Only Song*, Sheerie.

I heard someone recently refer to Brandon Sanderson's books as having "expansion packs." Namely, novellas or short stories that happen to the characters between the action in his other, very large, books. I can imagine more expansion packs, and one other novel, and that will probably wrap things up. If there's interest from readers, I've also thought of gathering the side stories and bundling them into a short-story collection.

So, do you know what the last book will be called and when it'll be out?

The success of *Only Song* and *Leave No Trace* will provide the impetus for getting a third book out. I've structured them both so that a third is not needed, but would illuminate a larger story. Like my previous book *Tune in Tomorrow*, the two other books coming out from *that* universe are also stand-alones, but they all exist in the same universe. Terry

Pratchett did this marvelously with his [Discworld < https://amzn.to/44sB4sJ >](https://amzn.to/44sB4sJ) books, for example. I understand why trilogies, etc. are fun to read, but I didn't want to require that someone read Book 1 to get to Book 2 and so on. There are diminishing returns for an author and a publisher when books are tied super-close together, so for me it was about creating a world whose stories could be read in any order.

When will a third book in *Stories From The Green Place* be available? Hard to say. But whoever chooses to publish it (or if I do it self-published) I do hope to have it out in the next few years.

Earlier I asked if *The Only Song Worth Singing* had been influenced by any movies, TV shows, or games. But to flip things around, do you think *Singing* could work as a movie, TV show, or game?

I don't doubt that you could make a game out of it — believe it or not, my novel [Tune In Tomorrow < https://amzn.to/3E105Rh >](https://amzn.to/3E105Rh) was almost, originally, a text-based choose your own adventure game with a company called Choice Of Games.

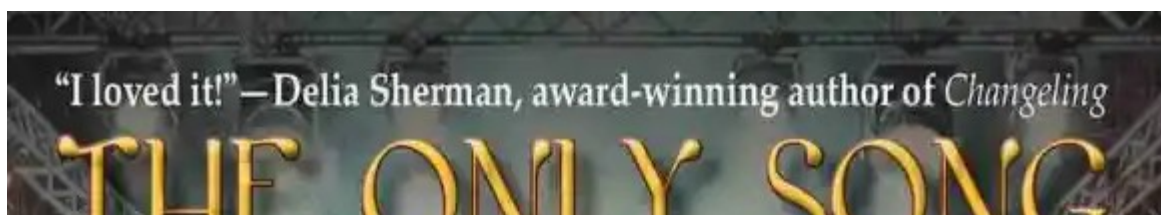
But I'd probably go with *Only Song* as a movie. Games are amazing these days, so much story and depth, and the graphics are gorgeous. But my expertise is with movies and TV shows — and TV / streaming has changed so much in recent years I think a three-part miniseries would be the best platform for it. The trick would be in portraying the magical characters as both real — and magical. Caitlin and Sheerie are the fairies who show up, and they're not tiny beings with fluttering wings. They're beautiful, but believable as human women. There are

also places later in the story where the music develops texture and color that I'd want to make sure looked right — not like some hallucination.

Casting the guys...this is always so tough for me, because we'd ideally want actors in their 20s and whoever's hot at any given moment changes all the time. I'd also hope for Irish or Celtic actors, too, which narrows the pool. Saoirse Ronan [*Lady Bird*] could be incredible as Caitlin; Eve Hewson [*Bad Sisters*] as Sheerie; [*Midsommar*'s] Jack Reynor as Ciaran; Domhnall Gleeson [*Star Wars*] as Mal; and Aidan Turner [*The Hobbit*] as Patrick. Mostly I'd cast them for their look, as well as their talent and heritage. Can any of these folks sing? Well, Hewson can (she is Bono's daughter, after all), but the others I really couldn't say!

So, is there anything else you think potential readers need to know about *The Only Song Worth Singing*?

That while there are scary bits and some very dark corners, it also has at its core a deep friendship among the guys. I don't think we see nearly enough stories told where the friendship among men is a critical factor; guys are often shown rooting for sports heroes, drinking, and otherwise isolated in their own ways. To return to my own earnest corniness, aside from music, I believe friendship is one of the only other ways we see actual magic in this world, and I'm here for that 100 percent.





Finally, if someone enjoys *The Only Song Worth Singing*, what novel of someone else's that mixes music and fantasy would you suggest they check out?

If you like *Only Song*, definitely check out Emma Bull's *[War For The Oaks](https://amzn.to/42stc8c)* < <https://amzn.to/42stc8c> >, in which musicians also get entangled in fairy worlds.

Grady Hendrix's *[We Sold Our Souls](https://paulsemel.com/exclusive-interview-we-sold-our-souls-author-grady-hendrix/)* < <https://paulsemel.com/exclusive-interview-we-sold-our-souls-author-grady-hendrix/> > is a lighter take, and deals in demons, but is also a fun, ripping yarn with scary bits.