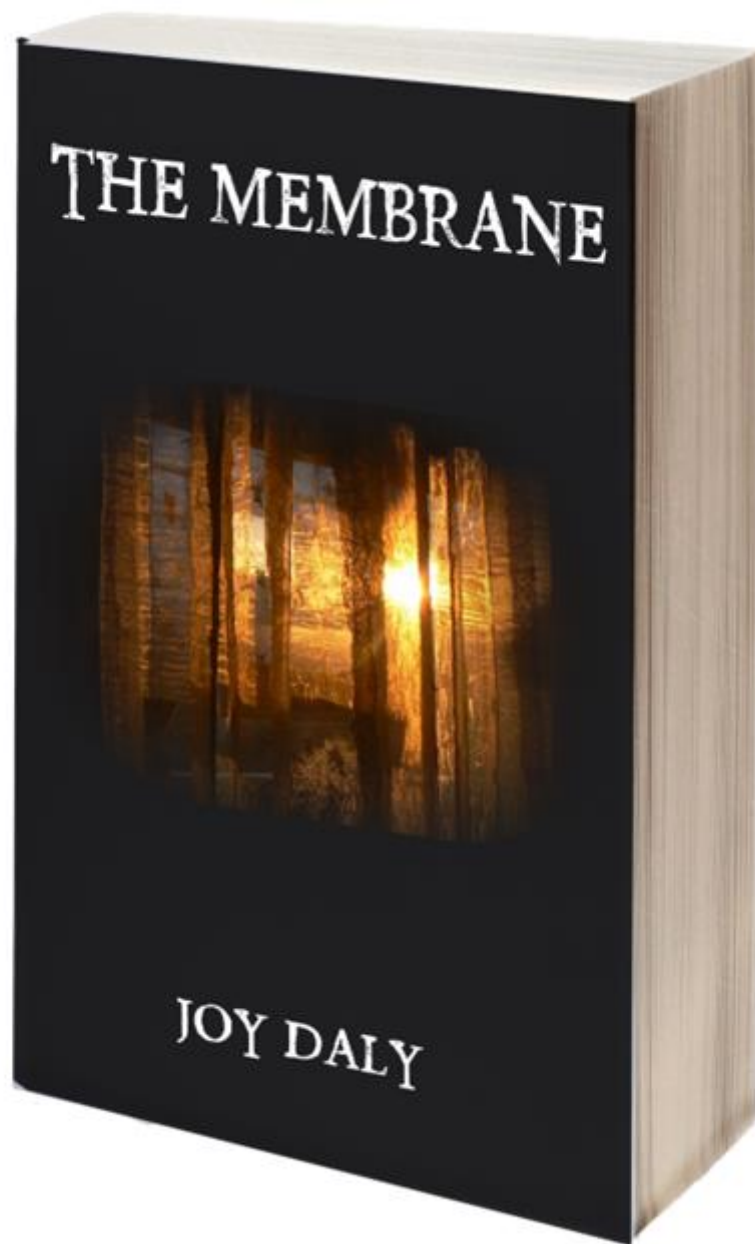


Middle Grade Fantasy Adventure

The final book in The Vortex series

THE MEMBRANE



CHAPTER ONE



Josh was listening to the crash of thunder as the rain pelted onto the tin roof. He snuggled into his bed and then his blankets caught fire. For a moment, he thought lightning had hit them and he gave a small shriek before realizing what it was. His heel – it was glowing which meant the Vortex was waiting.

Rolling out of bed, he looked at the digital clock's red display. Midnight, it was exactly midnight and he wondered whether that was significant. His heel had never lit up at night – never. What did night and midnight mean?

Liam, he'd have to tell Liam. Creeping out of his bedroom, he tiptoed into his big brother's room, moving noiselessly across the dusky blue carpet.

'Liam, Liam, wake up,' he whispered in his ear as he shook him by the shoulder.

Liam was in a deep sleep, dreaming of the dog he'd been nagging mum to buy for the past year. It was running around the backyard, shaking a stick, then it began barking.

BARK, BARK, BARK.

'Sh,' he said in his dream.

BARK, BARK.

'Sh.' he said again.

Then the dog started shaking him by the shoulder.

‘Let go, let go,’ he murmured, wondering if getting a dog was such a good idea after all.

Still the dog barked and shook him like a rat – then it began talking.

‘Liam, Liam, wake up.’

‘Huh?’ He opened his eyelids a slit and saw Josh leaning over him. ‘What is it?’

A crash drowned Josh’s reply and then another crash sounded, this one vibrating the walls. Josh shook his head frustrated and instead of speaking, he held up his heel.

Liam jerked upright. Josh’s foot was nearly as bright as that last flash and hieroglyph was burning around the glowing hole in the middle of his heel.

‘It’s happening,’ howled Josh in his ear. ‘Check out the disc.’

Liam sprang from his bed in one long smooth movement and bounded over to his desk. The bottom drawer held the disc that he and Josh had found on the beach. As he cracked it open, hot red light glowed spilled out and he exchanged grins with Josh. Yes, the Vortex was ready.

Another crash split the air and Rebecca woke with a start. Her pulse raced as her pupils dilated, adjusting to the zig-zags of lightning. Storms never frightened her and yet her heart was thudding.

Suddenly the Vortex flashed into her mind and she sat up and scowled. Why was she seeing it? She’d never seen it before. Sure, she saw the lizard as it crunched her arm, the bull as it gored her, even the poor baboon as it hit the ground, but the Vortex never visited her waking or sleeping.

It couldn't be active – could it? Nah, it only fired up during the day and besides it had been eight months since they'd returned from The Realms and eight months was almost double the time it usually took for the Vortex to appear. Eight months had given her a sense of security, a feeling of relief, eight months meant it was never going to fire up again.

She lay down and pulled the green and blue doona over her head, but sleep had fled. Again, the Vortex appeared behind her eyelids, and she flung back the doona and stared at the ceiling as it blazed and the thunder cracked. Maybe, she should call Liam and Josh. No, this was just some stupid dream. If she woke them in the middle of the night, they'd accuse her of being scared of the storm and make some crack about her being a girl.

Burying her head under the pillow, she shut her eyes tight.

'David, David.' The soft voice intruded into his sleep, yanking him from a dream where he was accepting a trophy for Dux of the year. That was impossible of course, and even in his dream state, David knew that. While Liam was around, that was never going to happen.

'David, we're waiting.'

The voice was coming from his cupboard and he swung his legs over the side of the bed, wriggling his feet into slippers, before crossing the carpet to investigate.

All was quiet inside the cupboard and he'd decided he was imagining things when the voice sounded again.

'It's time.'

David immediately knew where the voice was coming from, and he dug down into his huge bin of Meccano. The crown of The Exiles was hidden at the bottom.

‘Yes,’ breathed the voice as David’s hand closed around it.

A brilliant flash of lightning caught the huge diamonds and precious stones making them wink, as it illuminated the finely spun golden vortex that spiralled from the crown’s front.

‘Put it on.’

And this time David recognized the voice. ‘Huw is that you?’

‘Yes David, we’ve been waiting an age to talk with you.’

David’s normally immaculate blonde tipped hair copped a ruffle as he ran his fingers through it, a puzzled look on his face. ‘How can you speak to me here, when you’re behind the membrane?’

The crown has always been our conduit beyond the membrane and now that the Vortex is active, the membrane is vulnerable, more vulnerable than ever before.

‘The Vortex has fired up?’ David latched onto that as his blue eyes shone.

‘Yes.’

‘I’d better get over to Liam’s place.’

‘Don’t forget the crown,’ called Huw.

‘As if!’ and David fitted it onto his head.