



Mike signing copies of his book at Powell's City of Books, Portland Oregon.



The book has an interesting juxtaposition of formal literary language and modern vernacular. Tell us about that technique and the challenge of working with that tension to make viable dialogue.

Well, we don't really know how ancient Greeks talked among themselves in casual situations--soldiers on the march, family members, etc. Most of the extant historical writings are in very stylized, formal language, and therefore somewhat artificial. So I had to improvise a bit. For example, I have no doubt that in all eras and in all lands, soldiers swear, so the soldiers in my book swear, and they use modern swear words, otherwise it would sound comical, rather than soldier-like. It's kind of a tricky business, keeping the flavor of ancient Greece while simultaneously making soldiers sound like true soldiers, and I'm not sure if I'm always successful at it. It's just one of the challenges of writing an historical novel.

Tell us about the process of finding an agent and trying to get the book published.

Getting an agent is the hardest part of the process. After I wrote the manuscript, I bought a reference guide that listed hundreds of literary agents around the country. I sent out an embarrassingly large number of inquiries, and most of the agents wrote back to say they weren't taking any new clients, but I got a few positive responses. I checked their backgrounds on the Internet, selected one, and he sold the book to a New York publisher within a week. Since then it's been sold to four foreign publishers as well.

How many copies have sold so far?

About 20,000.

Have you received fan mail or any interesting feedback?

Well, I did get a nice reader review on the Amazon web site by Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House, as well as one from an equally famous financial consultant in Boston named Paolo Villasenor.

What are you writing now?

I've just completed my second novel, which is about the Roman Emperor Julian, who died in 361 A.D. He tried to force the whole Empire away from Christianity and back to the worship of the old Greek gods. It has a lot of major battle scenes, a murder mystery, religious conflict, and even a botched autopsy, for readers who are medically oriented. Incidentally, the main character and narrator is a physician. It will be published next October. In the meantime, I've started researching my third book, which is set in ancient Greece again, though it's not related to the others.

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LAICO LINES INTERVIEWS

MICHAEL FORD, NOVELIST

Congratulations on an astounding accomplishment. Tell us about how you decided to write a book and how you chose this subject.

Wow, I feel like I'm on Larry King! Actually I've always wanted to write an historical novel, but couldn't really find a topic--it seemed like everything had already been written. Then a couple of years ago, out of the blue, I came across the story of Xenophon and the march of the ten thousand. I thought it was a fabulous adventure, and when I started researching it I found that no one had ever done a fictionalized treatment of it. It was just what I had been looking for, so I started writing immediately, not even realizing how much work it was going to take.

What kind of research did you have to do to get the details right?

I was lucky, in that Xenophon was an historical figure and a very prolific writer. So I acquired all his works and read them, to try to get into his mind. I also read the works of many of his contemporaries, like Plato and Euripides, to get a feel for the times, as well as many later authors, both ancient and modern, who had written about the march. I did a lot of generic research on Greek warfare, tactics and religion, as well as tons of Internet research, which was fun. Finally, I had the whole manuscript reviewed by several Classics professors, who corrected some of my assumptions and gave me suggestions on where I could find additional detail. It all felt like a crash graduate course in Classics and history. So far, no critics or readers have tripped me up on anything, knock on wood!

How do you see your career as a writer evolving?

Ultimately I would like to make it my full-time job, and my publisher certainly thinks that's a possibility. Unfortunately, so much depends upon the whims of the reading public, New York publishing needs, Hollywood trends and whatnot, and those are very hard to predict. I'll just do the best I can for the next couple of books, and see how things turn out.

Who is your favorite author and which is your favorite book (top three)?

That's the toughest question so far--there are so many! I guess my number one author would have to be Robert Graves, with his "I, Claudius," but he wrote many more books that are well worth reading. I'm also a great fan of Vladimir Nabokov (to whom a young high-school student named Marnie Elizaga introduced me many years ago...), especially "Ada" and "Lolita." Gabriel Garcia Marquez ("One Hundred Years of Solitude") is a master, and for lighter reading, John Irving is a lot of fun. Marguerite Yourcenar ("Hadrian's Memoirs") is another great historical novelist, as is Steven Pressfield ("Gates of Fire"). How many did you ask for again?

When are you going to write an article for *Laico Lines*?

In our family, that job is already taken by Cristina. I don't think I could top her. Anyway, don't I get any credit for this interview?



NEWT HAS READ IT -- HAVE YOU?

NEWT GINGRICH:

Xenophon's *Anabasis* is one of the great historic adventures of the ancient world. It recounts the extraordinary epic of ten thousand Greek mercenaries abandoned around eastern Iraq who fought and marched across modern Turkey against overwhelming odds and returned to Greece by way of the Black Sea.

This novel is a sound first novel, openly based on Xenophon's work, and a good introduction to the challenges faced by Xenophon both in the failing Greece in which Athens had been defeated by the Peloponnesian Wars and the economy and society were both battered and in the long ordeal of first service and then a march of extraordinary endurance.

For anyone interested in thinking about the ancient world, the degree to which cultures have clashed, and the process of survival this is a thought-provoking book.



PAOLO VILLASENOR:

I don't like to read, but this was worth it! Although the backdrop of ancient Greece generally appeals only to academicians and intellectuals (of which I am neither), I found a refreshing universality in Ford's tale of Xenophon. Conflicts ranging from father-son relationships, patriotism, familial loyalty, friendship, cultural differences, and romantic love are all covered in this very well written novel. Ford has shown great ability in describing both the boorish behavior of soldiers-at-war one moment, and the high brow intellectualism of Socratic thought, the next. His adept use of language enhances the reader's ability to visualize the trials and tribulations of the novel's hero, and the situations at hand. This book can appeal to everyone. Hopefully Ford's next novel will come very soon.

IT'S NOT ALL GREEK TO ME REY DAVID:

Mike achieves a worthy life goal that some of us, myself included, only dream of achieving - to not only write a novel, but be published nationally.

The "Ten Thousand" is a fascinating story of the ill-fated campaign of a band of Greek mercenaries in the political chaos following the Peloponnesian War. After the Persian forces pillaged the Greek camp, the Greeks were stranded hundreds of miles from home without the provisions needed to return home. Xenophon, a junior officer who assumed command of the forces after most of the senior officers were treacherously slaughtered, leads his army in a perilous journey through hostile enemy terrain until they reach the Black Sea. Along the way, they were forced to face hostile forces, and barely survived starvation, frostbite, and disease.

The "Ten Thousand" was very interesting and fast-paced. Mike gives you a real feel for the horrific hardships that Xenophon and his army endured, and in my view, does a fine job with his character development. Mike weaves in colorfully drawn details of ancient Greek life which enrich the novel and the characters, but never feel overtly "historical" or forced. I finished this book feeling that I had received a layman's education in an area of history that I was previously only vaguely familiar with. That the author of this nationally published novel is your own relative should be more than enough reason for you to go out right now and buy the book. But if you need more reason, then consider the high marks that I (as one who has read it) give it. This is remarkable writing by any standard.

"YEAH, AND ROBERT DE NIRO IS YOUR COUSIN..." MITOS VILLASENOR:

I was so proud to see Mike's book prominently displayed at Barnes and Noble under New Authors. I bought two copies and as I was paying I told the lady at the register that I was actually related to the author! She just looked at me and smiled. I can't believe she didn't believe me!!