



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!