

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Michael Stevens, author of *Fortuna*

Start to finish, how long did it take to write *Fortuna*?

Eighteen months.

How did you get the idea?

I learned from NPR that online role-playing games have real economies, just like America or Japan, and I thought that was astonishing. That special sword you need in order to kill a particular dragon? It's worth actual dollars. You can buy stuff like that on eBay. And if I steal your sword while we're playing online, you can sue me in a real-world court. That's already happening in Asia. I was also attracted by the anonymity of these games. How far will people go if no one knows who they are, and their actions have no consequences? Of course, in the book, there are consequences.

Which part of the writing process did you enjoy most? Why?

Like most professional writers, I have a sort of ritual. I write almost exclusively in cafés, usually in the morning. What could be better than to be in a place where there's a lot of intellectual energy, you get these wonderful caffeinated drinks—maybe a croissant—and then you get to do the same thing Hemingway or Sartre did? By the way, I should say that drinking lots of coffee is arguably the only talent I share with those great writers.

What part of the writing process did you find most challenging? Why?

Dealing with editors! When I worked in advertising, my writing often got edited in ways that harmed the project, and over the years I came to hate that. So I have this automatic negative reaction to the editing process that's not always fair to the editor.

Did you have to do any special research while writing *Fortuna*? If so, what did you research and how did you conduct the research?

I read a lot of books about Renaissance Italy and the major houses. Some of it was very detailed, like issues about coinage and interest rates and other business practices. I also studied the paintings. I didn't have to research the technical stuff. I knew about that by working with dozens of high-tech companies over the years.

Do any of the characters in *Fortuna* have an autobiographical component? If so, which character, and how are you similar?

The autobiographical components are negligible. I did attend Stanford, and I was an executive in a rather large corporation, and I think that helps give *Fortuna* an authentic feel. But neither Jason nor his father are stand-ins for yours truly.

How did you get the ideas for the characters in *Fortuna*? Are any of the characters based on people you know?

I think every character in every novel is based on people the author knows or fragments of people pieced together in new ways. But as far as specific characters in *Fortuna*, what the lawyers so often recite is true: "any resemblance to persons living or dead is strictly coincidental."

What do you think is your protagonist, Jason Lind's, most admirable quality?

He questions things.

What do you think is Jason Lind's least admirable quality?

Through much of the book, he can't act with conviction, at least that's how I see it. He has a little of Hamlet's fatal hesitation, not that I'm comparing myself with Shakespeare. I think most readers would agree that he should commit more fully to his girlfriend in real life rather than chasing after an online heroine.

How do you think you are most like Jason Lind?

I have always had a question about how I fit into society. I still do.

How do you think you are least like Jason Lind?

Jason wants to plan things. I tend not to look before I leap.

What is your interest in online role-playing games?

For me, online role playing games are like an e-mail or instant messaging service that lets me conveniently connect with people. Second Life also helps me to keep my other languages sharp because, at different times of the day, there are people online from all over the world. The role-playing aspect for me is nil. I am not part of a Gorean clan or anything like that.

What do you think attracts Jason Lind to *Fortuna*—the escape, or the anonymity it affords him?

The English major in me has to point out that Jason Lind isn't a person, but a literary creation. Having said that, I think the short answer is escape. In *Fortuna*, Jason is an adult. In real life—"RL" as gamers say—Jason plays a role that is subordinate to the adults who run things.

What do you think, in general, is the allure that draws people in to online role-playing games?

Romance, sexuality, adventure, and violence are the primary themes of most online role-playing games. It's sad, but that's why people play. We live in a lonely, angry society. And online role-playing games give us a chance to have what we feel is missing in our lives anonymously. That removes a lot of inhibitions. A third factor is the lack of consequences. If a woman walks on the wild side and finds herself about to be attacked in a dark alley, she can just press the delete button.

Do you think there's a real danger in becoming compulsive, such as Jason does, when playing online games?

Yes. There are people who are online eight, ten, twelve hours a day, so yes, the danger is real. At the same time, this may be a good thing for some people, for example, those who are confined to a bed due to chronic illness.

How possible—and plausible—do you think a virtual community such as the one you present in *Fortuna* is?

There's no issue of possibility or plausibility. Such virtual communities exist. For example, there is a large online "Gorean" community with villages, costumes, etc., based on the (notorious and trashy) "Gor" novels of John Norman. There are also several such communities revolving around vampire lore. It is amazing to me, I'll say in passing, how many women seek out the role of virtual slavery in these communities.

As someone with a background in technology, how have you seen gaming evolve over the years? Do you think gaming has changed for the better? Why or why not?

The great leap forward in online gaming communities was the introduction of graphics, which are becoming increasingly realistic as time passes. The older virtual communities were based entirely on text, which combined dialog and what might be called stage directions. (He grasps her by the shoulders and pushes her down onto the bed. She whimpers, "No, please.") Some say that the text approach has fewer limitations and is more imaginative.

You present a great deal of detail about Renaissance Florence in *Fortuna*. What is your interest in Renaissance Florence?

Renaissance Florence was the birthplace of the modern global economy. In many ways it was the Silicon Valley of its time. It was also the birthplace of Machiavelli. If our business leaders and politicians would study Renaissance Florence more carefully, we would be much better off as a nation.

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Do you intentionally draw parallels between today's Mafia families and the prominent families of the Renaissance?

Yes. They are quite similar. The style of execution, for example, hasn't changed at all. Nor has the importance of execution itself as a tactic.

What made you want to write a novel?

Isn't that the dream of every English major?

Which writers influence and inspire you?

Not very many, and they're not politically correct. Frank Herbert, the seventies' science fiction writer. John Updike. Lawrence Durrell and others, I'm sure.

If you could give an aspiring author one piece of advice, what would it be?

I think attending writers' conferences is very, very helpful, especially when it comes to selling and marketing a novel. It's really the only way to get a good understanding of what the players are like: the agents, the acquisition editors, even the other writers, who can be friends as well as competitors. Also, aspiring writers should read my blog at www.fortunathebook.com, where I tell all about what it's like to actually get published.

What is the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

Somebody once told me that every short story should begin with something like, "Tom Smith glanced at his watch. Eleven thirty. If he didn't get to the top of the mountain by noon, he'd be dead." I think particularly today, in the era of short attention spans, each segment of a novel has to be like a short story that keeps people turning the pages. This approach, I should add, does not preclude the exploration of important, complex questions.

The worst?

"Writing is re-writing." I say, get it right the first time. If your work needs a lot of editing, you're not very good.

What do you hope readers will take away from *Fortuna*?

I hope readers are led to question some of their romantic visions of what human societies are like, and to take a new look at Machiavelli's vision. I don't mean that it's a good idea to simply kill your enemies—it's not!—but other aspects of his work have relevance, particularly in U.S. foreign policy and also in understanding the problems that plague inner cities.

What's next for Michael Stevens? Any other books in the works?

My next project is a novel of industrial espionage set in Berlin, 1923, during the Weimar Republic and before the rise of Hitler. The working title is "U," which is the chemical symbol for uranium.