



City of Dragons ... and Noir San Francisco

Your first book was set in 83 AD, in Roman Britain. Your second book—which moved you to a major publisher in a poor economy—takes place in 1940 San Francisco, a literary move chronologically, geographically, culturally miles apart. Why did you decide to do this?

Well, I've already made a case for Rome as a noir-type culture, so let me throw that back out there. But specifically why I moved forward with the Miranda novels ... there are a lot of reasons.

First, I knew it would be very difficult to get my first series picked up by a major publisher after the first novel came out through Five Star. And my goal is and always has been to write for a living ... my dreams are not centered around wealth, but independence from a day job. So I approach my writing partly from a sense of acknowledgement that this is a business, that I, as an author, am a business, and that I need to invest my time and energy wisely.

That said, I also want to write precisely what I want to write—otherwise, it wouldn't be any fun for me. And so I thought I should pursue the idea I had of a 1939 World's Fair-set novel—such a key year in history, and the year both my parents were born—and do it sooner rather than later. Plus, the first draft of CURSED [sequel to NOX] was finished. So I took the plunge.

But CITY OF DRAGONS isn't set in 1939 or at the San Francisco World's Fair—or, more properly, the Golden Gate International Exposition. What happened?

Alaska. Bouchercon 2007, my first big conference. That's why the book is dedicated to that event and the friends and colleagues I met there. I came back home inspired to dig deeper than ever before, to not be afraid to bare my soul and write like there was no tomorrow. And in the course of research, I came upon the Rice Bowl Party ... these huge events that were like three day city-wide carnivals and parties rolled into one. The World's Fair still plays a major role in Miranda's back story ... and I hope to write two prequel novels to CITY OF DRAGONS that are set during '39.

“Children's Day”—a Miranda short story I wrote for FIRST THRILL, the next International Thriller Writer's anthology—is set fully on Treasure Island [location of the San Francisco World's Fair] and does take place in '39.

So “Children's Day” is a prequel to CITY OF DRAGONS.

Yeah. It's set in April, 1939, and CITY OF DRAGONS opens in February of 1940, during the date of the actual Rice Bowl Party that year.

Did the book turn out darker than you'd planned? And why the switch to the Rice Bowl Party? What made that event so compelling for you?

It did turn out darker than I'd originally anticipated. Not slasher-gore dark. I'm not tough enough to write that stuff! [laughs]. More psychologically dark. Miranda is a very complex person, with an awful lot of hurt going on. Her back story is very rich. I mean, I cried when I wrote some of the scenes. Not necessarily Miranda's, actually, and I don't want to say anymore or I'd spoil the plot.

When I read about the Rice Bowl Party ... it just grabbed me. Because, you know, there were quite a number of Japanese businesses in Chinatown at the time, and it struck me how high the tensions must have been after 1937 and the Rape of Nanking. And I thought ... what must it have been like, to be a Japanese-American living there, with all that hatred and resentment around you? I mean, Nanking was a Holocaust of its own. And on Sacramento Street and Grant—the very block where Eddie Takahashi was murdered in CITY OF DRAGONS—there is in Chinatown today an office dedicated to getting the truth out about Nanking in the face of revisionists.

Wow. You must have done a lot of research.

I did. I owe it to readers to get even the details right. Plus, the research itself inspires me. I can get a bit carried away, sometimes ... even the phone numbers used for the actual businesses were the real phone numbers.

Did you write the book with the initial idea of wanting to make a social statement?

Not really. I wanted to bring out the humanity in an era that is often glossed over in a nostalgic way, and wanted to call people's attention to a war that too many don't know about [the Sino-Japanese War]. Any message you perceive in the book I hope arises naturally ... I can't help but think in political terms, sometimes, because I was raised in a very political and socially-conscious family. But my primary goal was to write a damn good book, one that makes you turn the pages, and hopefully one that leaves you thinking when you're done with it. I like to write books that can be re-read ... that's always a goal.

You stepped into some pretty big footprints with CITY OF DRAGONS ... Dashiell Hammett's San Francisco. How does it feel to be breathing the same air as Hammett and Chandler—that is, delving not only into the city of the Maltese Falcon, but writing about the classic noir era?

Well, every writer needs to tilt at windmills! [laughs] For me, I really feel like I've found my own style with CITY OF DRAGONS. February 14th, 2010, is not only Valentine's Day, but Chinese New Year and the 80th anniversary of the publication of *The Maltese Falcon*—in book form. I'll be on tour, celebrating with a party at Poisoned Pen Bookstore in Scottsdale.

I wanted to tackle this era because I love it. I wanted to pay homage to the men who created it. And I also wanted to write about a “real” femme fatale, a woman who could use sex as a tool but

who wasn't evil incarnate, not the eternally tempting, eternally bad woman of a lot of noir, both film and literary. So Miranda is both a reaction to a misogynistic tradition and a tip of the fedora to her predecessors. A femme fatale in a shamus suit, as it were.

Robert B. Parker called CITY OF DRAGONS "a stunning recreation of time and place that I greatly enjoyed . . . as will everyone who reads it." What is it about this time and place that compels you so much?

I don't know. I've always been pulled toward this era. My house is full of dishware, clothes, matchbooks, furniture, all kinds of stuff from the '30s and '40s. I love the design. I've always loved the films. Even as a little kid—when I was seven, eight years old—I ran around doing Jimmy Cagney impressions. I mean, how weird is that? I had this nostalgia for an era that was over long before I was born. So I feel very at home, when I write about the time and place . . . though I fiercely guard against dressing it up with the kind of rose-colored glasses we usually do, when it comes to our past—particularly a part that we're proud of.

This was an era of great ugliness – segregation, bigotry, ignorance, poverty, sexism, illiteracy—you name it. Most of the great social advances after the war came on the back of the New Deal platform. I mean, before FDR, we didn't have Social Security. We didn't have unemployment insurance. We didn't have the concept that the government should help support the citizens who comprise it. That fundamental thought helped give rise to the civil rights movement after WWII.

So I try to capture both the beauty—the Art Deco architecture, the dresses and hats and gloves, the slower pace, the romantic dances to Moonlight Serenade—and the ugliness.

What's next for Miranda and for you?

The same thing for both of right now. I'm hard at work on the sequel to CITY OF DRAGONS, as well as preparing for the launch in February. COUNTRY OF SPIDERS—tentative title—takes place three months later in 1940 . . . when the "phoney war" has become the World War, and New York and San Francisco decide to resurrect the bankrupt World's Fairs from 1939 . . . a last-ditch effort to pretend we could live in isolation.

What do you want readers to take away from CITY OF DRAGONS?

A book to enjoy, to savor, to read. Entertainment, first and foremost. And hopefully, it will leave them with some other things to think about, whether it's the history or a unique look at the period, or a complex and complicated heroine in Miranda. I'd like to continue writing her for a long, long time to come . . . through World War II and into the '50s. So I hope my poor Miranda is warmly embraced!