

K E L L I S T A N L E Y

Q&A — THE CURSE-MAKER

So, here you are, back with another Arcturus mystery ...

Finally! (laughs)

Tell us the publishing story. And did you write it before or after CITY OF DRAGONS?

I wrote the original draft of what became THE CURSE-MAKER (the original title was Maledictus) in late 2006. I actually finished it on Halloween night, so any spookiness you feel when you read it is genuine!

Of course, this was before even NOX DORMIENDA was published. And once NOX was sold to Five Star—and I started to learn about the publishing industry—I realized that it would be practically impossible to move to a major publisher with a second book in the series. It just doesn't happen.

So THE CURSE-MAKER was the second book you wrote, and the third to be published.

That's right. After my first Bouchercon in 2007 (Anchorage), I decided to give voice to another, darker series that had been floating around in my head. So I started working on it immediately. That book became CITY OF DRAGONS.

What year are we up to now?

2008. NOX DORMIENDA came out in July of that year, and I finished CITY OF DRAGONS in the fall. It went on the market in the middle of January, and we sold it by the end of the month. I was terrified, of course, since the market literally imploded at exactly that time. But I am very, very lucky to have a wonderful agent and a fabulous editor and publishing house who believes in me.

And even though you had a two book deal with a major publisher for your 1940 San Francisco noir series, you didn't forget about your Romans ...

I love Arcturus and his menagerie. Plus, NOX won an award [The Bruce Alexander Memorial Historical Mystery Award] and I felt like I owed it to the people who supported my debut book to try my hardest to get the sequel published. Writing the Roman series is a lighter experience than Miranda—so it's like a break for me. There's humor and sex and healthy relationships and I get to play with genre conventions in a more light-hearted way.

So ... I spent a few weeks completely rewriting the original manuscript. I mean, a total rewrite, lots of chopping and reassembling. The first draft had been too long, and I'd written it in a kind of fever to get it finished, so it needed a lot of work. Once that was done, my agent showed it to my editor, and my editor liked it.

So you were able to do the impossible—take a series started by a small press and move it to a major.

Only because my editor is a goddess! I am very, very grateful to my publisher for showing such faith in me. It's very unusual for someone at this early stage in a career—and it is early in terms of the number of books I have out, even if I feel old by now—to be able to have two novels out a year. Especially from the same publisher! But the folks at Thomas Dunne/Minotaur/St. Martin's are just incredible. I am forever grateful to them—and to Five Star, for giving me a start.

So what's new for Arcturus in THE CURSE-MAKER?

He's married, for one. THE CURSE-MAKER is designed as a relaunch—the vast numbers of people who have not read NOX DORMENDA (laughs) will meet Arcturus for the first time as a married man. Certain incidents in my first book are referred to—and are actually loosely related to the plot of THE CURSE-MAKER. But if you haven't read NOX, you'll get everything you need to. If you have read it, then you'll enjoy spotting the references—at least I hope so!

Is the book as eerie as it looks?

That's another fantastic cover by David Rotstein, who is an absolute genius! THE CURSE-MAKER delves into Roman beliefs in the supernatural ... necromancy (raising the dead), ghosts, and of course, curses. I think the cover gives you the sense of dread and doom and, well, state of being “cursed” that I try to evoke. There's actually a fair amount of fresh research in the book. The curses of Aquae Sulis were a special focus of mine as a graduate student in Classics.

Did you go to England for research?

I did! Right before I wrote the book. I graduated in 2006, and the trip was my graduation present. I was able to get some hands-on experience with the Aquae Sulis curses, thanks to the curator of the Roman Baths museum.

Speaking of scholarly research, I understand there was a lecture at Stanford University about your first book ... ?

A classical scholar named Sarah Janda conducted a workshop on NOX DORMIENDA and “Roman noir.” I was very, very flattered and very, very honored.

Did you attend?

No—I thought it would be out of place. As an author, you want your books and stories to take on meanings you never foresaw; you want them to live and breathe and enjoy a room of their own. I'm just very happy that someone thought my first book worthy of scholarly commentary ... especially since my background is in Classics.

So what's next for Arcturus, Gwyna and the gang?

Well, that really depends on how *THE CURSE-MAKER* does. Because my goal is to become a self-sufficient writer—meaning I want to write full-time for a living—what I decide to focus on for the future is determined by what I can sell, as well as what I want to write. So far I've been very lucky, in that I've been able to write what I want and have had it published top-of-the-line. I hope to continue the Arcturus series—I love the characters, and have a lot more plans in store for them! Besides, I've promised a certain family member that there will be another book with Bilicho very soon ...

NOX DORMIENDA is currently out of print ... any chance of a reissue?

I hope so! I'd love to see it in a trade paperback, since it was only available in hard cover. And e-editions, of course. We're waiting to see how *THE CURSE-MAKER* does, and my hope is that it will do well enough for my publisher to put out a new edition of *NOX*.

Anything in particular you want readers to take away from THE CURSE-MAKER?

It's an homage to Hammett's *Red Harvest* and *The Thin Man*—as well as Chandler's incomplete last novel (Robert B. Parker finished the book as *Poodle Springs*). I wanted to write a noirish tale with a married PI—and two people in love, at that. So I hope readers enjoy the noir aspect—and I hope they'll learn something about Rome that will make them feel closer to the period. People have changed so little in the past two thousand years, and I really want to underscore our common humanity across time and culture. If they take any of that away, I'm happy!