

Tim Davis interview, *Mystery News*, June/July issue, 2008.

Let's dive right in with some specific questions about the novels (*Critique of Criminal Reason* and *Days of Atonement*), and then we can move on to some other topics.

Q: What was the catalyst for writing your first novel *Critique of Criminal Reason*? After all, you each have careers, you've been husband-and-wife for twenty-seven years, and you're enjoying the much-envied opportunity to live in beautiful Spoleto, a small town in Umbria in central Italy. There must have been a unique motivation to become novelists. More particularly, why mystery novelists (when there has been—at least in the U.S. and a few other countries—a long-standing though slowly eroding bias against the mystery genre by insufferable snobs in literary circles, universities, and elsewhere)?

Michael: We both wanted to be writers. I was writing P.I. mysteries, Daniela was into horror, and we both got rejected. We were, it seemed, destined always to be teachers. I was teaching English, while Daniela continues to teach philosophy. But one day she came up with an interesting idea concerning Immanuel Kant, the Prussian philosopher, and his servant, Martin Lampe, and we decided to work on the theme together. Kant was a genius; Lampe was not. A bit like us, really! Again, like us, they had lived under the same roof for almost thirty years. But one day Lampe was summarily dismissed from his post as Kant's manservant. What was the reason for this turnaround? We were fascinated by the enigma, and began to speculate on possible causes. It was like a late divorce after a long and happy marriage. Both men were in their seventies; the effects of the split-up must have been devastating. Then again, what if one of them was crazy? What if they were both nuts? Research revealed that Kant was subject in old age to what we would today identify as Alzheimer's Disease. Over tea and biscuits in the kitchen, we worked out a detailed plot on Saturday afternoons in a couple of months. We took a good deal longer to write the book. Finding an agent took another while, as did the search for a publisher. It wasn't easy, but we found them both. And we found them because we didn't give up. Both of us are stubborn, but we are not intransigent. Every single rejection – and we had lots of them – inspired us to look critically at our work, learn from the opinions of others, revise carefully, then start trying all over again. Regarding the mystery genre, we believe that every book of whatever genre contains a mystery at its core. Otherwise, what's the point in reading it?

Q: How is that someone living in 21st century Italy would choose early 19th century Prussia as the setting in your novels? This is, after all, neither a locale nor historical period with which many people in the 21st century have much familiarity.

Daniela: Starting from Kant, our interest expanded to embrace the Prussia in which he lived. The most interesting part of writing a crime novel in a historical setting is the research which is necessary to write a convincing description of the people, places, and habits in which the action takes place. Prussia is especially fascinating. It was fiercely militaristic and rigidly aristocratic in an era of great political turbulence. In rapid succession, the Age of Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon transformed the ways that people think of themselves. The proudest military nation in

Europe was defeated by the upstart Napoleon and invaded by the French third estate. Serfdom was abolished, as was the aristocracy, and all men were (theoretically) equals. How did the Prussians react to what they considered to be a huge national disgrace? This was also an age of rapidly expanding knowledge in all branches of the sciences. We attempted to combine these elements in a re-evocation of Prussia which would fascinate and stimulate the reader as the plot unfolds. Our central character, magistrate Hanno Stiffeniis, explores a world which might be closed to non-specialist readers. Prussia no longer exists, of course, but it was the fiery crucible of the German state which would dominate European politics in the first half of the twentieth century.

Q: I would follow up on the foregoing by asking you how it is that you chose Immanuel Kant to become a central character in *Critique of Criminal Reason*, and an important influence in *Days of Atonement*. I ask this because I encountered philosophy and literary criticism as a university student (too many years ago), and I recall being alternately fascinated by and baffled by Immanuel Kant; in particular, Kant, as I recall, posited that only objects of experience (subject to objective tests) could be known, yet he was at the same time paradoxically concerned about the great problems of metaphysics—the existence of God, freedom, and immortality. How did you hit upon using Kant as a key figure in the advancement of criminal investigations within your novels?

Daniela: Immanuel Kant defined the modern pragmatic conscience. He posited the moral basis of contemporary thought, regarding Man and his place in Nature. We explore Kantian philosophy very indirectly, and extrapolate possibilities that may never have occurred to him. Kant never investigated a murder, so far as we know, but he certainly would have been as interested as anybody watching Fox News today. And his opinions of criminal behavior would have been informed by Rationality. Let's be honest, he would have made a great detective!

Equally, although Kant explored what was 'knowable,' it does not mean that he ignored the unknowable. We are convinced that the things which Kant chose *not* to write about are at least as significant as the subjects on which he wrote in depth.

Q: Your superb crafting and balancing of the elements of fiction (plot, characters, setting, point of view, style, and theme) are particularly commendable in both novels; theme, however, is often mismanaged by lesser authors (especially those whose heavy-handed didacticism destroys the balance of the work), which leads me to ask you about your awareness of ways in which you hope to have readers seize upon and appreciate the universality of the themes (especially the limits of logic, the ineffable nature of evil, and the influences upon the world from mysticism, the demonic, and religion).

Michael: We are not moralists. Nor are we didactic. The tendency is there, but we struggle to avoid being heavy-handed and ruthlessly cancel anything which interrupts the ongoing rhythm of the tale. We let the story tell itself, we allow our characters to explore attitudes which we do not share, and the conclusion is therefore unpredictable, but morally credible. This is why it is so important to create the 'world' of the novel. You evoke it, but you don't really control it. It has a life of its own, and the believability of the life that it takes on is the ultimate reward for the writer. You discover aspects of your

characters and their behavior that you didn't foresee. If it works, they really *do* have a life, and you simply help them to live it.

Q: Related to the foregoing, I would be remiss if I didn't ask about the themes of Jewish mysticism and anti-Semitism in early 19th century Europe as they figure prominently in *Days of Atonement*. The appearance and contributions of Aaron Jacob's character (with a last name that is coincidental your last name, Michael) and his reputation as *Baal Shem* (and the informed allusion to his real-life antecedent, *Baal Shem Tov*) raise all sorts of issues related to Jewish mysticism versus anti-Semitic attitudes and suspicions.

Michael: One of the most direct consequences of the French Revolution was the liberation of Man, of every color, creed and religion. The position of the Jews, and their social history in Germany, both before and after the events that we describe, is surely a subject of the very greatest interest. We do not pretend to be experts, but we carefully researched those aspects of contemporary Jewish life in Prussia which coincided with our story, and we feel that they add a dimension which justifies their inclusion. Aaron Jacob is a scientist who also happens to be Jewish, and these elements condition his way of seeing and judging contemporary events. Hanno Stiffeniis is a Pietist and magistrate, and he views the same events from a different perspective. It is in the collision of these perspectives – the interaction of all the differing world-views of the various characters in the plot – that the drama of the story is played out.

Q: Moreover, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), as I understand it, atones only for sins between man and God, not for sins against another person (and God seems significantly absent from *Days of Atonement*). Given all of that, to what extent are you concerned that some readers may either misapprehend or react unfavorably to the “solution” to the mystery in *Days of Atonement* because of those issues? (I have avoided specifying the “solution” because I do not want to provide a plot-spoiler to readers.)

Daniela: Our choice of title has nothing to do with religion. We chose the plural “Days” because the atonement in the title is multiple and varied, and it applies to all of the characters, not merely Aaron Jacob. A great deal has already been written about God, and so we simply avoid trying to mentioning Him. We have been favorably reviewed by a number of Jewish websites, however, and we are very proud of the fact. Then again, every reader is entitled to his or her opinion, whether it is positive or not. If you manage to publish a book, then you have to live with the opinions that your work provokes. We tend to read the good, and ignore the bad. At the same time, we learn from both, and promise ourselves that we will try to apply that knowledge the next time around.

Q: You've each revealed a bit of your personal lives in other interviews, and those revelations suggest a different kind of question about your novels: To what extent would Hanno (a tireless disciple of Kant who nevertheless is occasionally humbled by mistakes in reasoning and judgment) and Helena (a remarkable woman who has acquitted herself admirably in both novels) be modeled upon Michael and Daniela?

Both: There are elements of both of them in both of us. The better elements, we hasten to add! Every writer reveals something of himself through his characters. At the same time, given the historical context of the novels, our characters are, we hope, children of their time. In any case, they are personifications of that time-period as we conceive it. And so, inevitably, there are bits of us in there as well, transported back in time in a sort of ‘virtual history’ in which we both play a formative part.

Q: On a lighter note, how is it that your cat Lionello managed to receive a cameo appearance of sorts in *Days of Atonement*?

Daniela: Lionello was a starving kitten tied to a tree when we found him abandoned in the countryside. His only sibling had just died. Now he’s a beautiful, chubby house-cat (see photo below). Any cat-owner will tell you how fascinating and individual the comportment of their pet is. Lionello makes us smile a hundred times a day, and we thought that the world should know about him. He deserved a cameo portrait, and we believe we drew a nice one, though he seems oblivious to the fact. If any reader of the novel buys a cat because of Lionello, we would like to hear about it.

Q: During your “Proustean” interview on your website, you each identified historical figures you most denounce and detest; Michael named Hitler, and Daniela included 20th century dictators (which covers a lot of territory) and “all religious fanatics.” To what extent do those denunciations figure into your vision of early 19th century Prussia and Napoleonic invasion and occupation as portrayed in your two novels?

Michael: I was more specific about Hitler, questioning how he managed to worm his way inside the German psyche. You could say the same of any political dictator, and any influential religious fanatic, of course. Fanaticism and the violence which it inspires are the greatest danger faced by the human race. When one man, or group of men, decides that everybody else should be this, or that, then the freedom of individuals is at risk. Individuality is our most precious gift; our attempts to guarantee this wonderful freedom are, unfortunately, what make us most vulnerable.

Q: Also during your “Proustean” interview, you each identified writers and books you have most admired; I was particularly interested in some of Daniela’s list (Franz Kafka, Marguerite Yourcenar, Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and *Tales by the Brothers Grimm*) and some of Michael’s list (Herman Melville, the Russian novelists, Charles Dickens, George Pelecanos, and Jasper Fforde). Important influences of those writers and books seem particularly noticeable in your two novels; I also would favorably compare your works to those of Umberto Eco, Luigi Pirandello, and Arturo Perez Reverte, though you may wish to dispute those comparisons). In connection with those observations, I would add that Harold Bloom, the American literary critic, has written extensively on the “anxiety of influence” which he claims all writers experience as they negotiate the sometimes difficult territory between their own originality and the inescapable influence of antecedents. With that having been said, would you comment upon the extent to which you are aware of and either embrace or resist the influence of your admired antecedents?

Both: We have been influenced by every single thing that we have ever read. As we both read widely, the influences are truly vast. If we have ever purloined an idea or a concept that does not belong to us, then we humbly apologize to the originator, living or dead. At the same time, it won't stop us reading and unconsciously purloining!

Q: Speaking of Harold Bloom again, he points out that reading is a “solitary praxis,” an observation which every lifelong reader of literature can appreciate, but I think nearly every reader must wonder about what I would label “the Michael Gregorio praxis of authorship.” As readers, we are accustomed to imagining (and sometimes hearing about) the solitary author (someone like Flaubert) struggling to find *le mot juste* or (someone like Hemingway) laboring for an entire day over a single sentence. How is it then that two people—a married couple—actually go about the process of authoring a novel?

Daniela: “Solitary praxis” is a myth, at least with regard to present-day writers. Most authors are far from alone when they work, accepting advice and asking for help from a whole range of interested parties, such as agents, editors, experts and “tweakers” of one sort or another. They also frequently turn for company to the instant intellectual info-bank, which is Internet. Thinking of the novel as an inspired work of art that issues from an ivory tower is an outmoded Romantic idea. Today there is so much pressure to write a book in a certain way, to a certain length, by a certain date, and satisfying the criteria of the market-place, that the solitary author must be the exception to the rule. Having said that, we are, perhaps, one of the few exceptions! In the sense that solitary authors tend to lose themselves down solitary paths, while two people working closely together on the same problem tend to constantly challenge and correct the excesses of the other partner. We both wrote solo before writing together. We have done the “ivory tower” thing; we didn't really enjoy it, and we weren't very successful at it.

Q: As your novels have moved out into the international market of critics and buyers, there must have been good and bad moments in your experiences; for example, I know that the *Kirkus Reviews* criticism of *Critique of Criminal Reason*—an unkind review that was flawed by its lack of perception by a reviewer who may not have taken time to read the book—must have been irksome to you. What has surprised you (either pleasantly or unpleasantly) about critical and popular receptions for your first two novels?

Michael: One bad review is a necessary counterweight to all the good reviews. Our very first review, which appeared in *The Guardian* in England, was a really savage attack. Even worse, the reviewer seemed to be talking about a different book, accusing us of filching a line from *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. We looked high and low, but we never did find what he was talking about. And Michael had just read a new novel by a British author who *had* nicked a line from Tennyson's poem! In our opinion, the reviewer had one too many beers, then tagged our title onto someone else's book-review when he arrived home drunk! However, starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist* more than made up for it. So did the fact that *Playboy* chose “*Critique of Criminal Reason*” as one of the twenty best books of 2006.

Q: I have read somewhere that the third novel is on the way: *A Visible Darkness*. Can you share a bit of a preview?

Both: *A Visible Darkness* has already been submitted. We were very nervous after working very hard for many months. Walter Donohue, our editor at Faber reacted immediately by saying, "It's the best thing you've ever written." Peter Joseph, our editor at St Martins Press, thought that it was "fantastic." We are more than happy. Hanno Stiffeniis is once again investigating murders. Helena, his wife, is expecting another child. This time, Hanno is out on the Baltic coast among the women who gather amber on the seashore. Terrible things have been happening out there...

Hang on, Tim, wait a few more months and you'll be able to review it for us!