



Vanity Fair, 29.11.2007.

Michael Gregorio - two faces behind a name.

One writer (worth a million copies).

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Sometimes, it pays to be a couple.

Sometimes it pays to wait. To marry after having thought it through, weighing up the pros and cons. Thinking, perhaps, that the adventure might last a year or two, then finding that you are still together 27 years later. Like two halves of an apple, a perfect match, a balanced blend of irony and passion. No children to upset the apple-barrel. A pampered cat, instead.

Above all, it pays to have a hobby that you cultivate together.

Chapter by chapter - you write one, I'll write the next.

Clearly, it pays...

The couple that I interviewed have just sold a million copies of their first book around the world, starting out from a humble submission to a competition for would-be authors in an English daily newspaper. They live a quiet life. Their house looks out over the sleepy town of Spoleto. New Year's Eve with friends, a convivial dinner, then a classic film like Ben Hur. She is Italian, a teacher of philosophy in the local high school; he is English, a partner in a language school, a collector of daguerreotypes.

Michael (Jacob and Daniela De) **Gregorio** still don't know precisely how many copies their first book has sold around the world. *Critique of Criminal Reason* was published last year, and the sales

figures are still coming in. As is the cash. It trickles in slowly but surely, like drops distilling from an alchemist's alembic.

Just as they hoped.

After all, the highest ambition they set for themselves was to maintain the life-style that they had before they started writing for a living.

The title of their latest novel is *Days of Atonement* (Einaudi Stile Libero).

It is the second of the four titles that they will write with the pulsing rhythm of a mazurka before the end of 2009. "Philosophical thrillers," as they have been defined. Darker than dark, overflowing with blood, pulsing with terror, Gothic tales set in the Prussia of Immanuel Kant (the philosopher that Daniela loves above all others). Kant appeared (and died) in the first novel, but his rational spirit presides over the later books, where his protégé, the young magistrate, Hanno Stiffeniis, investigates the ways of Evil, and tries to solve the crimes that are its trademark.

It comes as a surprise to discover that the two-in-one writers are kind and gentle. A nice couple. One of them begins a sentence, the other finishes it.

Are you working on the third novel at the moment?

Michael: "Let's try and avoid frightening our editor. We have to submit the book by the end of January. Let's just say that it's coming nicely to the boil."

Will there be more terrible murders?

M: "Surely, there will."

Daniela: "That's the fun of it."

And you have been so enormously successful...

M: "We couldn't have imagined it."

D: "To sell the books in twenty different countries!"

M: "We were more surprised than anyone."

D: "You know how difficult it is to publish a book in Italy."

M: "It isn't easy in England, either. But there's more chance of breaking into the market."

Is that why you chose to write the books in English?

D: "To be honest, I write in Italian, and Mike translates what I've done. I look it over, and if I don't like what I read, we argue ferociously. But the final draft of the manuscript that we submit is in English. The various foreign publishers employ their own translators. In Italy, too."

M: "We wrote in English, because we knew that no-one would publish it here. Out of curiosity I asked our editor at Einaudi if he would have bothered to read the typescript in Italian. He thought it over for a moment, then he said: 'Probably not.'"

So, what's the story behind this second novel?

M: "We had an idea about the massacre of a Prussian family. The story opens with the discovery of the mutilated corpses of three children in a cottage in a wood..."

A sort of Brothers Grimm awash with blood?

M: "Andrew Taylor (author of *The American Boy*) says that our tales are 'grimmer than Grimm,' which we consider to be a huge compliment."

D: "In the Grimm fairy tales, the old woman is inevitably a witch..."

M: "And the grandmother is usually a wolf..."

D: "The atmosphere is always very sinister."

M: "But we aren't sinister at all."

D: "It's just that we like the Gothic atmosphere. And the mystery, of course."

M: "The daily news is full of violence..."

D: "You follow that stuff more than I do."

Where and how did you two meet?

D: "In Oxford one summer. Mike was my English teacher. I was 25. He was 27. We were living in an English college. Very Gothic. And there was a story going around about a certain teacher..."

What was the story?

D: "One night, there was a knock at my door. One of the other students, a French girl, was really upset. She said that she had heard the cries of a girl being tortured. And she was convinced that the torturer was one of the teachers... Well, we sat up all night discussing what to do - we'd woken up all the other students. Was there a killer on the loose? Should we call the police? I was confused and afraid, and the French girl kept insisting that the murderer was Michael.

And then, what happened?

D: "The next morning at breakfast, we saw the 'victim' all in one piece, happily munching on her toast and sipping coffee.

M: "Who can say what she'd been up to. I think I can guess. Whoever the fellow was, it certainly wasn't me!"

D: "That's how I met the sweetest man in the world!"

And was that the start of your story?

D: "Oh no. But we became good friends. And that's the way it stayed for the next few years, bumping into each other whenever I happened to be studying in Oxford."

M: "I didn't want to get involved with my students."

D: "I like that! We weren't a couple of kids."

M: "It was an ethical question."

D: "Things matured over the years to the point that we decided to get married. Both of us thought that it would end in a rapid divorce, however."

How come?

M: "I was worried about Italy, the language, fitting in..."

D: "At our wedding in Fiesole, there were five of us. Mike and I, my parents, and a friend who had to translate. Michael had 'forgotten' to tell his family about our plans."

How do you manage to work together?

D: "We divide up the chapters, each of us choosing the ones we want to write, depending on the overall plan, and the research that we've been doing."

Yes, but who has the initial idea?

M: "We work out the plot together until we agree on every point."

D: "Then, I tell Michael that I have an idea for the starting-point..."

M: "No, no! I come up with the opening chapter. Then, Daniela changes it."

D: "I'm strong on deciding what will happen, and on the psychology of the characters. Michael's strength is the physical description of people and places."

M: "We write in separate rooms."

D: "I work in the kitchen, naturally. He works in his study, even if it is a mess."

M: "There's nothing 'messy' about it. It's where I keep my collection of daguerreotypes."

How do you see life at this point? Do you think of yourselves as writers?

D: "Not entirely. I still teach in the classical high school, though now I only work part-time. But that's my life. To be honest, the most intense part of life is caring for my father, who is very ill."

M: "I'm working part-time, too. At the English Centre, a language school in Spoleto, which was founded by my friend and partner, Giuseppe Marcocchi. I've been there for over 20 years."

What is Daniela De Gregorio like as a teacher?

D: "Well, I impose my passions on my students. Kant, above all. I don't really stick to the curriculum. I hope to see their eyes light up with fire. That's the most important thing."

And what are your students like?

D: "Some of them are splendid, others less so. Some have read our novels, and say that they enjoyed them. But one or two are... Well, I mean, just look at this! Someone sent me this sms anonymously a short while after *Critique* was published."

What does it say?

D: "Immanuel Kant. Pain in the arse. A hunchback, too. Lionello queer. Up yours."

Were you upset about that? And who is Lionello?

D: "Lionello is our cat. Upset? Not particularly. But I kept the message. It's a comment of a sort.

And part of what it means to be successful..."

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