

## **Steve Berry and Daniel Levin on *The Last Ember***

Interview conducted by Steve Berry, New York Times best-selling author of *The Charlemagne Pursuit*.

Steve Berry: Let me say that *The Last Ember* is a winner. Secrets, history, conspiracies, adventures. Great stuff. Where did the idea come from?

Daniel Levin: First of all, thanks – it's an honor to hear that from someone like you. As for the story, the level of espionage in Rome and Greece has always fascinated me. I was a classics student and was surprised to discover loads of intrigue around every corner. So I thought, what if some of that came with modern consequences?

SB: Worked for me. You really brought the ancient world alive. What about that corpse you describe in the opening pages of the novel? The one the Italian antiquities squad finds floating inside an ancient column. Great scene. Is that level of preservation possible?

DL: Amazingly, it is. Embalming techniques in the ancient Roman world used amber and preservative oils. What got my imagination stirring was when I read a historical report that some 15<sup>th</sup>-century Roman masons once found a perfectly preserved ancient woman floating in an oil-filled sarcophagus. Now that's a powerful image.

SB: The illicit antiquities trade couldn't be a timelier topic, especially with many museums currently investigating what artifacts in their collections may have been illegally obtained. Did current events affect your writing?

DL: Absolutely. While I was researching in Rome, there was a case brought against the former curator of the Getty museum, which has one of the finest antiquities collections in the world. I attended the trial and listened to the Italian prosecutor's opening arguments as to why many of the artifacts should be returned. Fascinating stuff to me, both as a

writer and a lawyer. I ended up working much of that Italian courtroom atmosphere into the novel.

SB: Did you actually research some illegal excavations?

DL: I did, and the more I researched illegal excavations around the world, the more I started to see a pattern: some of the largest sites of archaeological destruction were damaged for purely political purposes – simply as a way to erase the past. That's when one of the novel's themes began to take shape. What if someone was politically motivated to control not the future, but the past?

SB: Tell me about your hero, Jonathan Marcus.

DL: He may seem content in the beginning of the novel, but there's more to the picture. He's a young, successful lawyer sought after by unscrupulous antiquities dealers. And with a background in classics, he's certainly putting his knowledge of the ancient world to profitable use. I've always found the moral tension of the antiquities trade fascinating. We see these ancient artifacts in museums in their display cases, but some are clearly soaked in the blood of the trade. Lawyers are often caught in the middle of that, and that seemed a good place to introduce a compelling character.

SB: And as the novel progresses, we learn more about his conflicts.

DL: He's been using his talents to defend these dealers, but on the other hand, you can tell there's a real passion inside him for the ancient world. Eventually, we learn why he had to abandon his doctoral work at the American Academy in Rome years before. He pushed his research too far, cared too much, now he's being forced to do the same thing all over again. Lots of conflict. It's what makes a character interesting.

SB: I saw in your bio that you too spent some time at the American Academy in Rome. What was that like?

DL: Remarkable. I was a visiting scholar at the Academy in '05. What an experience. It's located in a McKim, Mead and White building on the Janiculum Hill, with an awesome rare books library. All the Renaissance manuscripts were there, at my fingertips. Even more incredible were the others who were there, Rome Prize Fellows, I had a great time listening to them share secrets of the ancient world at the local wine bar.

SB: One of my favorite settings in the novel is the command of the Italian antiquities squad, where we see all the high-tech equipment used to catch antiquities thieves around Rome. Did you research that on site, too?

DL: I did. The Italian Cultural Heritage Guard is truly one of the best antiquities crime units in the world. The commander, Generale Giovanni Nisti, was gracious enough to allow me to interview his staff. Conducting antiquities raids is dangerous work. His team is on the front lines protecting Italy's past. I came away with a great respect for the work they're doing.

SB: Did you have all your research mapped out before you started writing, or was it more of a "let's see where this takes me" approach?

DL: I tried to map it out, but every time I opened up the text of an ancient historian, I kept seeing things like strange translations of Josephus's Greek, or an errant mark in the margin, or some unexplained notation. Those things kept stirring my imagination and the story kept changing, making it more and more believable.

SB: Personally, I love conspiracies, especially those from long ago. Part of your plot suggests a vast intelligence network inside a Roman emperor's palace. So here's a question you're going to be asked countless times. How much of that is true?

DL: We know that some strange things happened in Emperor Titus' palace after he returned from sacking Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Everyone within the emperor's immediate circle — his mistress, Berenice, his court historian, Flavius Josephus, his favorite stage actor Aliterius -- were either executed or mysteriously disappeared. Titus himself went mad and, on his deathbed, said, "I have made only one mistake." But he didn't explain what that was. What better fodder for a novelist than that?

SB: Okay, tell me what you think of the book. I'm always curious what writers think of their own effort.

DL: My primary goal was to entertain, so I hope readers have a great time with the story. I did writing it. Now if they happen to learn something they didn't know, then that's a bonus. History is more fragile than any of us think.

Roman emperors tried in vain to control history. Today, it's being done again by people who try to destroy various historical sites or deny the past to fit their own beliefs and politics, whether it's Holocaust revisionism or the intentional destruction of ancient ruins at World Heritage Sites.

SB: Speaking of World Heritage Sites, those chapters racing beneath the Colosseum and Temple Mount felt like you'd lived them.

DL: Let's just say that research got me in some tight spots, literally. I squeezed through some of the underground streams that run beneath the Temple Mount — far from where tourists are permitted. Not sure I'd recommend it. It was summer above ground, but in those tunnels, it was so cool and clammy you could see your breath. And, of course, there's the issue of the Waqf authority who control the Mount.

SB: The group you mention in your novel?

DL: It's an actual organization that has had control of the Temple Mount since the 12th century. They don't permit anyone beneath, so I didn't exactly have a tour guide when writing those scenes.

SB: Well, I'm glad you finished this first book in one piece. Because we're all looking forward to your next one.

DL: Which I'm hard at work on now. Antiquities lawyer Jonathan Marcus can't take a breather quite yet.