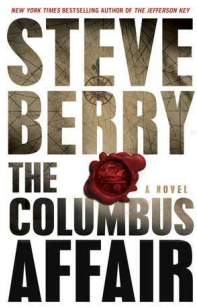


Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Monday, 21 May 2012 11:45



For 500 years historians have pondered the question: Who was Christopher Columbus?
The answer truly is another question:

Who do you want him to be? *From Writer's Note: "The Columbus Affair"*

To prepare for his new book, "The Columbus Affiar," New York Times bestselling author Steve Berry read 400 books on the enigmatic explorer.

"We know so little about this man," Berry said during a telephone interview. "We know nothing about his family, where he was born, who his parents were. We don't even know what he looked like. During his lifetime he himself created confusion. He purposefully kept everything in the dark."

One of the books Berry read was Simon Wiesenthal's "Sails of Hope," published some 40 years ago.

"Wiesenthal was the first one to postulate that Columbus was a Jew and was probably sailing to the new world looking for a new Jewish homeland," Berry explained. "The Jews of Spain are the ones who financed his voyage. Ferdinand and Isabella [king and queen] didn't have five cents to put down."

According to Berry, Columbus planned his voyage to coincide with the day the Jews had to either convert to Christianity, leave Spain or be killed by authorities of the Inquisition.

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"He sailed on Aug. 2, 1492, with 87 men aboard and not one priest" the attorney-turned-author noted. "The Jews had to be gone by midnight. What a coincidence."

While Columbus didn't discover a new homeland, he did find Jamaica.

"They kept the Inquisition off the island, and Jews flourished and controlled the island for 150 years," he said. "That's historic fact."

With Columbus' mysterious life as a backdrop, Berry weaves several plots into the new book. As the book opens, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Tom Sagan, who has taken a huge fall from grace, is carefully planning to kill himself. What's to live for? He's lost everything – his marriage, his family and his career. He's even denied his Jewish heritage.

An urgent message involving his estranged daughter, Alle, puts everything on hold as Sagan moves heaven and earth to rescue her.

Along the way, Tom and Alle encounter double agents, danger on both sides of the Atlantic and an ancient Jewish treasure that may or may not be hidden away on the island of Jamaica. Berry, who is Catholic, worked hard to get that part of the story correct.

"It's a complicated religion," he said. "I had to do a lot of research. I didn't want to screw this up."

Helping Berry out were several early readers, including Sephardic Jews [referring to the descendants of the Jews who lived in the Iberian Peninsula before their expulsion in the Spanish Inquisition] and non-Sephardic. "I'm not saying it's perfect, but those folks offered a lot of insight."

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Berry and his wife, Elizabeth, took a break from scholarly research and traveled to Prague and Jamaica to get a feel for the locations used in the book.

"The Jewish Quarter in Prague was one of the most amazing places I've ever been," he noted. "Most of it was torn down, but they retained the synagogues, the town hall and the cemetery. There are 12 layers of graves there, one on top of the other. We were the only ones at the cemetery one morning. It was very moving."

On their trip to Jamaica, the Berrys traveled into Maroons country. Maroons are the indigenous people, who fled to the mountains when Columbus landed.

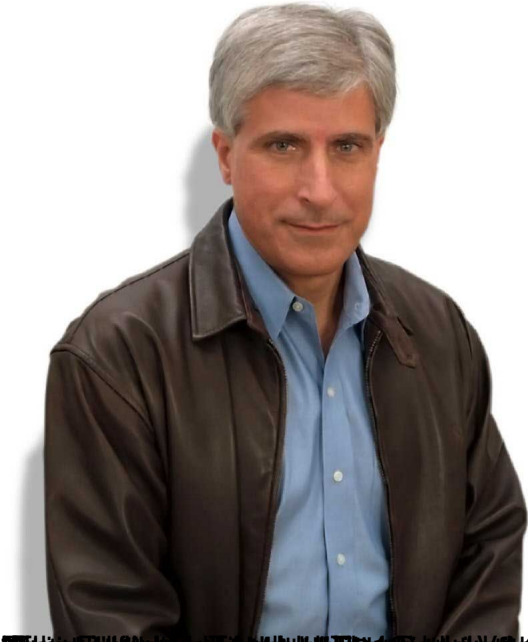
"They ruled the interior of Jamaica for a couple of hundred years," Berry explained. "The British tried to defeat them, but they couldn't – until they brought the dogs in. The dogs brought them to their knees."

Although the British deported most of the Maroons, some of their descendants remain on the island. Berry and his wife spent a day with one of their leaders, Col. Frank Lumsten.

"We hiked to the sugar ruins in the mountains," he said. "The whole atmosphere changed from the beach. It's a rain forest. It looked like something out of an Ewok village. It was quite remarkable. I wanted to capture all that in the book."

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