

*Q&A with Mark Van Aken Williams, author of The Prophet of Sorrow*

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*Why did you write The Prophet of Sorrow?*

I was reading “The Anatomy of Melancholy,” by Robert Burton, and was struck by something he brought up when discussing folly, melancholy, and madness. He said that all fools are mad, though some madder than others. When delineating on his point, he delved into the concepts of passion, anger, envy, discontent, fear, and sorrow. He ended with, “And they who call you fool, with equal claim may plead an ample title to the same.”

I loved this and thought that there was the genesis of a novel in this alone. About what, I did not know. But it piqued my interest enough so to start (what turned out to be) a year of research into these six subjects.

After this was done, the idea about the assassination of Leon Trotsky actually just popped into my head. I thought—what an interesting thing that happened south of our border that probably most Americans know nothing about. Why Trotsky? Again, I don’t know. I have no political interest in him. But history is of great interest to me. And as it turns out, the material that I gathered in this year’s time simply fell into place when I outlined the plot of the novel.

*Have you always been a writer?*

Not really a writer, but a poet. I was turned onto poetry in fifth grade when introduced to Haiku, and have been writing poetry ever since. My first book of poetry was recently published (*Circus by Moonlight*). It represents work from between 1990 and 2007.

*What was the hardest part about writing this novel?*

When I went back through the research, I pulled out things that could be applied to the different characters and put them into each individual file. When I wrote the story, this material actually made it very simple to flesh out the characters when putting it within the framework of the plot. So in reality, this was a very easy book for me to write. Once the process started, the whole thing came together within a very short period.

*If you were to ask a celebrity to read this novel, who would you choose? Why?*

George Clooney. I would want someone who is very smart to read this book. It is not light reading, and I just think that George is someone who would take the time to read it slowly and reflect on what is written.

*What do you hope readers will gain from reading The Prophet of Sorrow?*

I think I said it best in the book: “Generally speaking, human beings are free to separate themselves from their past and their prospects. This is the moral climate of our sound and fury; because ultimately we are responsible for what limits us. It is our obligation to develop conceivable narratives of ourselves, determine the future domain of the possible, and guide oneself toward it.”

This is not necessarily that easy. But as I also say in the novel, “All we know from the dead hand of Old Time is that what we do matters; that our discretions make a difference, and that existence is an epoch-making undertaking. What is significant is the attitude one takes toward his intransigent destiny; the way in which he carries his burden, the courage he demonstrates in suffering, and the sobriety he displays in calamity.”