

INTERVIEW RESOURCES

Looking for interesting sidelights about ROMA AMOR or author Sherry Christie? Here are some sample interview questions and answers. If there's more you'd like to know, feel free to contact me at sherry@roma-amor.com or 207.497.2119.

Q What's the most surprising thing you learned about the Romans?

When a contractor built a bridge, he had to post a bond with the authorities. If the bridge failed to hold up for 20 years, he forfeited the money. Isn't that a great idea? In the French town of Vaison-la-Romaine, traffic still flows across a bridge the Romans built 2,000 years ago—and it's far from being the only one still in use. I think this illustrates the Romans' foresight, which in many ways contrasts with our own shortsightedness. All too often we look for an easy way out, or we go with the lowest bidder, instead of choosing an option that aligns with our values. You have to wonder what will be left to admire of our civilization two millennia from now.

Q Was Caligula as mad and bad as he's supposed to have been?

Some historians actually consider him to be evil, but I don't think that was the case. Put yourself in his shoes. As a child, he lived a charmed life. Both his parents were members of the imperial family, and he was a doted-on mascot to his hero father's legionaries. Then, when he was seven, everything changed. His father died suddenly, possibly poisoned; and his mother and older brothers were finished off, one at a time, by his great-grandfather Augustus's successor, Tiberius. For the rest of his youth and young manhood Caligula had to kowtow to Tiberius, fearing he would be next on the execution list.

Finally, at age 24, Caligula took power after Tiberius died. At first, I think, he hoped for the unconditional affection he had enjoyed when he was a child. He did all the right things: promising cooperation with the Senate, taking care of obligations that Tiberius had neglected, and so on. But decades of Tiberius's despotism had turned Rome into a snake pit. When Caligula's own inner circle began to conspire against him, I think he had a nervous breakdown. He had tried so hard, and here they were spitting in his face! From then on, I believe his good intentions were overwhelmed by a bitter resolve to be unpredictable, outrageous, and offensive—in other words, to become so dislikable that it would no longer hurt him not to be loved. He's supposed to have said, "Let them hate, as long as they fear."

Q What about sleeping with his sisters?

While Tiberius lived, such egregious behavior would have invited the axe to fall on him. And afterward, with hundreds of beautiful women flinging themselves at him, why would he bother? In the book, I've imagined a couple of ways this rumor about his sisters might have gotten started. Incidentally, it's interesting that Caligula's happiest marriage was to a woman almost old enough to be his mother.

Q How did you get started as a writer?

While I was in college, I entered some creative work in a yearly contest to choose 12 guest editors of MADEMOISELLE magazine. They picked me as one of the 12, and I worked in New York City for a month as a sort of apprentice fashion and beauty copywriter. After college, that became an actual full-time job. From there I segued into working for a wonderful advertising agency in Columbus. I've run my own freelance financial writing business for about 25 years now.

Q When did you start writing fiction?

Oh, I've always been writing stories. Fan fiction, sexy sci-fi . . . I had a series of detective novels whose hero was a Vietnam vet turned golf course superintendent. Then I got fascinated by Rome and never looked back.

Q Did you keep writing while you lived on a sailboat?

Yes. In the earliest days I had a “luggable” computer, the TRS-80 Model 4P, which was about the size of a sewing machine, and a tiny Kodak dot-matrix printer. They both ran off battery power with the help of inverters. Thank goodness computers have gotten lots lighter since then, and of course much more powerful.

Q What was the hardest part of working on ROMA AMOR over the years?

Getting over brain fatigue after a long day of writing for clients. What saved me was taking chunks of time—2 to 4 weeks at least once a year—for a novel-writing retreat. La Muse, in southwestern France, is my favorite place for this.

Q How is commercial copywriting different from fiction writing?

I'm convinced they use different parts of the brain. Commercial writing is like playing three-dimensional chess: you're simultaneously thinking of what the client needs to communicate, what the end user wants to hear, and what will meet your own creative and ethical standards. By contrast, writing fiction is relaxing. It's like the difference between lifting weights and sinking into a bubble bath. Maybe enjoying it so much means that I should be working harder at it? Or maybe it just means I should never give up the contrastingly greater effort of my day job.

Q Did you consider traditional publishing before publishing independently?

Yes, I went through at least three bouts of agent searches over the years. The earliest responses were personal and often encouraging. The next time, I remember a few more form letters and some non-responses. My most recent carefully composed query, a couple of years ago, resulted mainly in deafening silence. This is baffling and exasperating. How much effort does it take to hit “Reply to” and type, “Thanks, we received your manuscript but don't feel it's right for us”? Twelve measly words to appreciate that an aspiring author would like to help you make money.

My sense is that most agents and traditional publishers have abandoned the search for good new writers in favor of what's trendy or sure to sell. By backing away from risk, they're surrendering the future of their industry as more writers recognize the greater control and profit available with independent publishing.

Q What advice would you give a writer who wants to publish a book?

I'd say three things. First, don't give up. If you truly want to hold your own book in your hands, you can make it happen. In the meantime—this is second— inveigle your way into a critique group of writers, at least some of whom are more accomplished than you are, so you can learn from critiquing their manuscripts and from their critique of yours. Third, talk to other writers who have been through the publishing process so you know what to expect.

Q Are there other books in the works?

Marcus, Aurima, and I are working on a second book, tentatively scheduled for early 2017.

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