

Feature Article
for *The Medievalist*

Medieval Historian Turned Novelist Takes on neo-Nazis

White supremacists are “weaponizing” the Middle Ages. One historian aims to stop them!

This is the tagline for Phil Adamo’s debut novel, *The Medievalist*, a literary thriller where the book’s nerdy heroes directly confront neo-Nazis. The tagline could also be read as Adamo’s artistic mission.

“In the real world,” Adamo says, “neo-Nazis are coopting medieval symbols for their nefarious purposes. It’s up to medieval scholars to stop them.”

While the novel is fiction, its inspiration is ripped from the headlines.

For example, in 2017, at the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, James Fields drove his car into a crowd of people, killing 32-year-old protester Heather Heyer. According to Adamo, Fields was photographed earlier in the day with a group of neo-Nazis, all of whom carried black shields that bore medieval insignia.

“Brenton Tarrant is another example,” Adamo says. “He was the gunman in Christchurch, New Zealand, who killed 50 people in two mosques in 2019. Inscribed on his gun was the crusader motto, *Deus lo vult*, “God wills it.”

“Neo-Nazis and other white supremacists are trying to construct a history of the Middle Ages which is all white,” Adamo says. “They hope to create a cultural heritage for themselves to strengthen their groups’ sense of identity.” According to Adamo, that history and heritage are built on a lie.

“There were many people of color in the Middle Ages and many cross-cultural interactions,” Adamo says. “There’s even an Arthurian knight of the round table who’s black. But this doesn’t make any difference to the other knights, because the black knight is just as noble as they are.”

Adamo’s own background makes him an ideal candidate to tell this story. He taught medieval history for twenty years at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. During that time, he wrote dozens of scholarly papers and history books on the medieval period. He even taught a course called “Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages.” In 2015, he was named ‘Professor of the Year’ by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

The characters in *The Medievalist* go beyond writing articles or teaching courses to combat racism. If the villains in the story want to use medieval symbols for evil, the hero scholars of the novel meet them on the battlefield of propaganda. They use their wits to trick the neo-Nazis. Telling you how they do this would be a spoiler. Let’s just say, it’s ingenious and, in the end, shocking.

The Medievalist is also a satire, of sorts. It spoofs academics a little bit, and neo-Nazis a lot.

In one exchange in a fictional chatroom, two neo-Nazis are discussing their insomnia. The first neo-Nazi asks the second if he's tried warm milk before bed.

"Doesn't work for me" the second says. "My girlfriend said I should take melanin."

"Melanin?!" the first replies. "I think you mean melatonin."

"Pretty sure she said melanin," says the second.

"That may be," concludes the first. "But melatonin helps you sleep. Melanin is what makes a ni—"

The Medievalist is fast paced, with well-drawn characters and plenty of action. It's also a novel of ideas, asking questions about the uses and abuses of history, and whether or not academics should also be activists.

"The book is my attempt to stand up to white supremacists, who pose a very real, very dangerous threat to our world," Adamo says. "We need to do something to stop them."

(576 words)

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