

By Howard Lovy

The thing about a conspiracy theory is that the more reality is hidden, the more blanks will be filled with conjecture. And while these pieces of fiction can make for some destructive fake news on your social media feed, it can also make for some compelling fodder for thrillers. And there are few places more mysterious and filled with hidden ritual than the Vatican. That's where author Deborah Stevens comes in.

With a couple thousand years of intrigue imagination to draw upon, her religious thrillers have already created a fan base after she began writing them relatively recently. Calumet Editions has published *The Serpent's Disciple* and is set to release its sequel, *Holy Predator*, in October.

These books, and more planned, are the kinds she likes to read, where you think you know where the plot is headed, and then you're led down another path. "I like an intellectual kind of challenge to my reading and it just seemed transfer over to my writing," Stevens said.

For her first book, she started with what she knew, and then her research took her to new places. "I'm Italian, so I stuck with Italy for the first book. My dad was from Pesaro, so I decided to use that in the book as one of the places that the characters would go. Then I looked for a secret society that I had never heard of before. I came across Propaganda Due. Things like that just started coming together. Then there is so much going on with the Vatican these days and I started to develop a story."

The result is pure good vs. evil and more twists and turns than the catacombs. In our interview below, we talk about how she gets her ideas and, of course, the obvious comparisons to a famous author.

When you think of religious thrillers, you think of Dan Brown. Is that a blessing or a curse?

That's an interesting question. I've learned, over time through discussion with other people, there are many who are not familiar with Dan Brown and the books he has written. His books have been made into movies and people still do not recognize the name. It makes you realize that with all that success as an author, there is still an audience out there you need to reach out to.

If they do know the name and like his work and my books are being compared to his, then it's a blessing I would say. But there are many other authors that are favorites of mine—James Rollins, Raymond Khoury, Steve Berry to name a few. I hope my novels fall somewhere within that same group.

My intent is to build a story around factual events and real individuals I uncovered in my research, and create a world where the reader can be entertained, but at the same time learn about things that have actually happened.

How did you begin writing these historical religious conspiratorial thrillers?

Boy that's a mouthful! I've wondered about this myself. I always wanted to know how something worked or why it happened. If I wanted to find the answers I had to ask questions or do a lot of research to find out. People always laugh at me because I ask so many questions. It's funny, I always remembered people asking me, "Are you writing a book?" If only I could have come to that realization a long time ago. There were many times I put ideas down on paper for a book and stuck them into a folder with the intention of taking one of them and writing a book when I found the time. As time went by, I noticed my bookshelves (that's before the eBook) were filled with every book Tom Clancy and Robert Ludlum ever wrote. There was fiction, and not just general fiction but specifically suspense, mystery or action thrillers, and more recently the genre of religious thrillers.

A book that I always think of, *Eyes of the Virgin*, by Thomas F. Monteleone, sparked a new passion for me to seek out books based on unsolved mysteries or conspiracy theories related to

events in the history of religion, and even more specific, the Vatican. Being Italian and Catholic presented an endless source of subject matter to draw from to write a book. I have found the best of both worlds in writing about actual events, past and present, that have captured the attention of the world and try to figure out the why and how behind them through fiction.

The best fiction, and conspiracy theory, usually begins with a kernel of truth—those books with twists and turns, where you can't predict what's going to happen; those are fun to read but they're hard to write. Do they often just take on a life of their own?

Yes and that is why it's so much fun to dig deeper into all the conspiracy theories that exist pertaining to the history of the Vatican. This is where my love for research becomes fascinating, taking me down paths, stumbling upon information I otherwise never would have known. As I develop the plot, the trail of crumbs left behind for the reader needs to be reassessed, making sure I am connecting all the dots. I find myself needing to continually make sure I have my characters in the right place at the right time. So, it's no easy task to write a thriller.

One strange thing that happened when writing both books, I knew halfway through what I wanted to happen in the final chapter and went ahead wrote it, then went back to writing the second half. So I would have to say, yes, it does take on a life of its own.

Describe what this book and your next one are about. What kinds of clues can readers discover? Would I need to be Italian or Catholic to relate to it?

No, you do not have to be Catholic or Italian to relate to it. Every novel needs a setting and I chose two subjects with which everyone is familiar. In the next book, I center the story on the Jesuits, a religious order in the Catholic Church also known as God's soldiers. There is a lot of intrigue connected to the Order and with the election of the first Jesuit pope I couldn't think of a more fascinating subject to write about for a fiction thriller.

In *Holy Predator* I introduce the reader to a group known as the Bohemian Club that some readers might have heard of. Its headquarters are in California. Every two weeks in July the members of the Bohemian Club travel to Monte Rio, California, to a 2,700-acre private campground heavily protected with armed guards and what they do there is kept secret.

Kind of like the Skull and Bones. Yes, sometimes reality is even more interesting and bizarre than anything a writer can invent.

There's no doubt that couldn't be truer. The rituals that take place in some of these secret societies, it's difficult to believe they are not made up by someone with a vivid imagination. So in *Holy Predator* we have the first Jesuit Pope, a group called the Bohemian Club, the wealth and power of the Vatican and of course I had to have the mafia in there somewhere.

Of course, the mafia! I don't know how religious you are, but do religious Catholics have a problem with some of these scenarios?

That's a question I probably cannot answer. The book is fiction, but depending on one's belief system any subject matter touched upon in a novel can probably create controversy among some readers. It's not my intention to show any group as being evil or good. As a writer of fiction I look for subject matter that could make for an interesting story.

Let's back up and get to know you personally. You grew up in Michigan, but you didn't start writing until after you left for Minnesota. You started writing later in life.

Yes, Michigan is where I was born and raised. I attended Michigan State University and after college moved to Traverse City, Michigan, until eventually moving to Minnesota. Then, several years ago, I remember thinking it was time to get to work and write that book I have always planned on doing. I knew the genre I wanted to work in and decided it was now or never. Pulling ideas out of thin air, I started and never stopped. Of course, looking back, wished I'd attempted

this sooner, but I look forward to waking up in the morning anxious to figure out what my characters will be doing next and discovering new facts about things I never knew before.

I'm noticing your book covers. They involve elaborate symbols. Is that something you designed yourself and what is your take on the importance of a good cover and title?

Covers are incredibly important. I know the look and feel of what I want or hope the cover to look like, but I need the talents of someone who understands how a cover will look in a thumbnail posting on Amazon, for instance, which I know nothing about. Since the genre is fiction thriller I want something that will hopefully pique the interest of the reader.

You began this journey as a writer relatively recently. How does it feel?

It's been a fabulous journey. I absolutely love what's been happening. With it being a first book, you don't have any idea of what to expect. It's received five awards and has received wonderful reviews, which is very satisfying, validating my efforts at becoming a writer of fiction books. One thing I can tell you, it's a lot of work to write a book. I don't know if it's easier for some than others, but for me it took two years to write each book. My second novel is what I would consider a little more mainstream and I am curious to see if my audience increases because of it.

I have the third book in mind and this time I leave Italy and head east to Hungary, where I learned about something called the Throne of Satan. How can I resist not turning that into a book?

Just for fun, I want to write a nonfiction book about information that is written on the unsolved mysterious and conspiracy theories I touch upon in my books associated with the Catholic Church and the history of the Vatican.

Do you use social media to stay in touch with fans?

Yes, there many ways people can follow or get in touch with me. I have a Facebook page, ; and LinkedIn page, . I have a website, which is www.deborahstevensauthor.com and a blog . I also have a twitter handle, . I presently have 75K followers and would love to grow that number. You can find the first book and the second when it comes out in October on Amazon in paperback and eBook. And of course, would love to have readers write a review or contact me directly. You can also find a trailer of my book on YouTube if you search for