

Author Interview — 10 Sample Questions & Answers  
for *The Medievalist*

INTERVIEWER: We're talking today with medieval history prof turned novelist, Phil Adamo. His debut novel is entitled *The Medievalist*, which is what they call a scholar who specializes in the Middle Ages.

It sounds like this book might be the typical "campus" novel, filled with faculty politics and student hijinks. But it turns out the scholars in the book are fighting neo-Nazis! What's the inspiration for this story?

ADAMO: In a way, the story is "ripped from the headlines." Today, neo-Nazis are coopting medieval symbols and using them to promote their racist agenda. For example, using Viking runes on their shields or writing mottos from the medieval crusades on their weapons. This is what the gunman in Christchurch New Zealand did, who killed 50 people in two mosques in 2019.

Also in real life, there are medieval professors and scholars who are trying to fight against this.

INTERVIEWER: And you're one of these neo-Nazi fighting professors?

ADAMO: Hm, not exactly. Like many of my colleagues, I've done some anti-racist work in the classroom. I taught medieval history for 20 years at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. One of my seminars was called "Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages."

INTERVIEWER: And you also won some teaching awards?

ADAMO: Yes. I won some campus teaching awards. In 2014, I got a teaching award from the Medieval Academy of America. That's the big professional organization for medievalists. Also, in 2015, I was named Minnesota Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

INTERVIEWER: Impressive.

ADAMO: Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: Getting back to today's neo-Nazis. To be honest, this sounds a bit silly. I mean it sounds like neo-Nazi are playing dress up to go the Renaissance Festival. Who cares? Why does it matter?

ADAMO: Yes, kind of. But what the neo-Nazis and other white supremacists are really trying to do is to construct a narrative of the Middle Ages that's all white.

They hope to create a kind of cultural heritage for themselves, to strengthen their groups' sense of identity. But all of that history and heritage they're creating is built on a lie.

There were lots of people of color in the Middle Ages and lots of cross-cultural interactions: on trade routes, during the crusades. For seven centuries in medieval Spain, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian cultures all thrived within the same communities.

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."

INTERVIEWER: And today's white supremacists don't like this?

ADAMO: I think it's safe to say that they're against diversity and they want to impose those anti-diversity "ideals" on the past. They're very drawn to the "Nordic," "Viking" cultures because they see them as untouched by other cultures. But even this "Viking purity" is a lie. The term *vikingr* is not the name of a people or an ethnicity, but a term to describe groups of sea-farers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, historians wanted to create narratives to support nationalism and colonialism. So, they imagined the "Vikings" as all white. But 21<sup>st</sup> century historians have shown that the "Vikings" were not homogenous and white, but actually multicultural and multiracial.

INTERVIEWER: These real-life medieval scholars you mention, from today, the medievalists who are fighting white supremacy, they aren't doing the same thing as the characters in your book. Are they?

ADAMO: That's right. Most of them are writing articles or books or teaching courses. Just like I did. And that's all fine. But in the novel, I wanted to push the limits of what fictional medievalist characters might do. I wanted the characters to directly confront the white supremacists. The main plot point is how neo-Nazis use symbols to promote their agenda. The scholars in the book decide to use symbols to fight against that agenda. How they do that is ingenious and ultimately shocking.

INTERVIEWER: And how do they do that?

ADAMO: Well, that would be a spoiler. Suffice it to say that it's very clever.

INTERVIEWER: One of the main characters in your novel is a Black male grad student. Another is a young, Jewish woman. How does that work with you, the author, as a middle-aged white male?

ADAMO: Yes. It's very complicated. Of course, we hear about this a lot today. White authors being criticized or "cancelled" for writing characters of color.

Some critics argue that authors with my profile— white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, male—should not dare to write about people who fit different profiles. "Those stories aren't the white man's stories to tell," and so forth. But in a book about people fighting racism, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy, it feels dishonest (and kind of boring and unrealistic) to have a story without a range of diverse characters.

Rendering realistic, diverse characters is difficult, not least because growing up in a racist society has ingrained racist stereotypes in all our minds. I'm no exception. The key is to recognize and work against them.

I've benefitted greatly from a blog entitled Writing With Color, which is moderated by a group of women writers from diverse, intersectional backgrounds. According to the blog's founders, the goal is "to help writers who aim to write diversely and do it well."

Among other things, the blog offers specific advice on how to describe the skin tones of people of color. For example, they recommend using "tawny" or "russet" instead of "cocoa" or "chocolate." The former are specific colors among an array of colors. The latter "food words" are cliché and fetishizing, connected to colonialism and the slave trade. Writing With Color also describes stereotypes and tropes to be avoided, like the "magical Negro," and "the white savior."

All that said, I set off and did my best to have empathy and humility, questioning my own biases as best I could, and doing lots of research, at Writing With Color and elsewhere, with the hope of writing complex, realistic characters. I suppose readers of all stripes will let me know if I was successful or not.

INTERVIEWER: The book takes on a serious subject, but at times it's quite humorous. For example, when one of the neo-Nazis confuses melatonin for melanin and wants to use the latter as a sleep aid, the character's ignorance is meant to evoke laughter. But are neo-Nazis really a laughing matter?

ADAMO: There's an activist Srdja Popovic, who helped overthrow the Milošević regime in Serbia. Popovic promotes a comic protest strategy called "dilemma actions." According to this strategy, when white supremacists march through your town, send in the clowns! If the fascists ignore the jokes being made against them, they seem weak. If they respond with violence, they seem mean and stupid. That's their dilemma.

For my part, I choose to stand on the shoulders of giants: Charlie Chaplin and Ernst Lubitsch, Mel Brooks and Taika Waititi, not to mention the Three Stooges and Bugs Bunny! All of them poked fun at Hitler and the Nazis. As with the original Nazis, to poke fun at neo-Nazis is to appropriate back the symbols they appropriated from us and to use those symbols against them.

A great example of this is when Taika Waititi, an indigenous Maori, directs the movie *Thor: Ragnarok*. Thor's hammer, a medieval symbol that's a favorite of white supremacists, gets destroyed. It's a multiracial slap in the face to the neo-Nazis' version of an "all-white" Viking age, a kind of cathartic exorcism that reveals what Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil."

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for spending time with us today.

ADAMO: It was my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

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