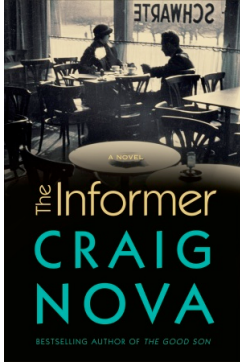


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A Conversation with Craig Nova, author of The Informer



Craig Nova is the award-winning author of twelve novels, including The Good Son and Cruisers. His next book, The Informer, will be published in February 2010.

In this visionary thriller, distinguished author Craig Nova tells a story of a time and a place like our own.

Gaelle, a young woman with a scarred, erotically appealing face, and Felix, a boy with a lame foot, come to depend upon each other at the end of the Weimar Republic in Berlin. Along with the chaos of financial collapse and street fighting, a killer is loose in the city and several of Gaelle's acquaintances have been murdered. Gaelle is much in demand and slips in and out of the lives of politically connected men – many corrupt, some sinister, all looking for power, money, and sex. The friendship of Gaelle and Felix, or what seems like friendship, is all either of them has as their world becomes more dangerous.

You seem to be changing as novelist. That is, you were known, or often were known as a writer's writer, a literary novelist, and the like. But, as nearly as I can tell, the last couple for books, Cruisers and The Informer do all the things you have always done, but something else, too. What is that?

Craig Nova: One of the most difficult things to get across to readers is the fact that you're doing something new. Often, early on in the books you publish, you get pigeon holed.

I have noticed in my own reading that I am more interested in three things, story, story, and story. And, I guess, to be honest, or brutally honest as they say in the New Yorker jokes, I have been inspired by my favorite writer, or one of my favorite writers, Graham Greene, who often wrote what he called an entertainment. I am not sure that I have gone that far, and, in fact, when I read Greene, it is hard for me to distinguish the entertainments from the other books.

But the truth is I have not abandoned any of the things I am concerned about (character, trying to write clearly, a language that tries to invoke beauty even in tense circumstances).

But, yes, in this book and Cruisers I am far more interested in plot, in suspense, in keeping the reader curious.

And, the truth is, this is a lot of fun and satisfying, that is suspense as a kind of music or a way of telling a story. It gives a writer a lot more freedom than I had previously imagined.

So, yes, the books are changing.

I guess you could think of The Informer as a sort of Brighton Rock set in Berlin. Some of the same elements are there: gangs (political parties), someone trying to figure out

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how a murder took place, increasing tension, more murders, etc. And, of course, the Berlin Rings, or gangs, like Immertreu make an appearance, too.

I'm sure you are asked this question a lot, but I think it is a good place to begin. How did you come to write this book?

You know, when writers are interviewed, they often come up with a kind of short hand or an answer that sounds good for this question. And often they come up with the answer when they are in a taxicab on the way to a radio interview or something like that.

I'm not saying that writers are being devious, or anything like that, but the truth is that the motivations that go into writing a book are so deep, so mysterious, so much a part of what an author discovers by the actual writing, that this question, how did you come to write this book, is very hard to answer. Often, a writer doesn't really know, but is ashamed to say this in an interview. How can you say, "I spent four years writing a book for reasons I didn't understand?"

But, instead of the kind of answer a writer thinks up in taxi on the way to an interview, I'd like to try to describe, as honestly as I can, how The Informer got its start. You will notice the grammar here. Often, it is not what a writer does to a book, but what a book does to a writer.

The book began when I was thinking about George Orwell (one of my favorites, if not my favorite writer) and his discovery or his codification of the fact that people don't look at the facts and then make up their minds. Instead, they make up their minds and then look for facts to support what they already believe.

So, I began to wonder about this in the modern age. I wondered what would have happened if Monica Lewinsky had disappeared or turned up dead. Just think, I thought, how difficult it would have been to find out what really happened. Every political group would have an interest in one version or another, and they would all be cooking the books, in terms of facts, to make their politically advantageous view seem to be the right one.

And then I began to think about my favorite writers, and I imagined a sort of collaboration between Albert Camus, Graham Greene, and JM Coetzee in a novel set in Berlin at the end of the Weimar Republic, a time so much like our own. PLEASE UNDERSTAND. I am not saying this book is like theirs. I am saying that many writers or, for that matter almost all writers, have inspirations, and theses were mine. So I wondered what a book, written in collaboration by these three would look like if it was about Berlin in 1930.

So, how did you come to Berlin?

Well, I thought there are three things that should go into writing of a book like this, and these are story, story, and story. And I wanted to be free to write a book with the right elements and so I began to look around for a place that was dangerous, exceedingly dangerous, that resembled our own age, that is the place would be essentially modern (a sort of contemporary world in disguise), had great atmosphere

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and in which everyone had some agenda that they were willing to lie for or to kill for. This brought me to Berlin in 1930.

You say that Berlin in 1930 is a lot like the modern age. Why do you say that?

Well, first a citizen of Berlin at this time could easily think that things had gone somehow terribly wrong and that no one really knew what to do. Or, worse, there were groups, rigid, doctrinaire groups, that wanted to convince people (and to intrigue in such a way as to make people believe) that they knew what the problem was. Turn on a talk radio station some time, in the modern age, and listen for awhile. You will see what I mean.

And then many other similarities presented themselves, things that really set me back. These were, for lack of a better word (and this really doesn't cover it), cultural matters.

The first is that in Weimar Republic, people had an intense fascination with the body. It's shape, its perfection, both men and women. And if there was ever something that seems modern, this is it. Just think of what people do these days, both men and women, to change the way they appear. Plastic surgery alone is extremely odd (breasts, buttocks, even the shape of genitals, both male and female, are being subjected to plastic surgery, and only for the sake of appearance). I have a picture right here from 1930 of Women at the Prussian College for Physical Education. It's not the desire to stay in shape I am concerned about, but some other quality that is behind it. A desire to be superior in some way, if only through the body.

So, that's one item. The other is a fascination with sport. And along with these two, a belief in an elite, in people who, by their appearance, but their abilities of one kind or another were somehow in a group that existed above ordinary human beings. They were, I guess, celebrities. And, of course, celebrity was another item.

Then the culture had a fascination with violence, and many horrible crimes became sort of icons, with reenactments (in Cabarets), not to mention they were depicted in paintings. Surely, this element is one that I found oddly familiar. Just look at some of the most violent films of the modern era or how we are mesmerized by particularly violent and appalling crimes.

So, I tried to find a way of putting human beings, of all varieties, into this atmosphere, into this existence.

One of the characters is a woman who works for Inspectorate A, the serious crimes section of the Berlin Police department. Could you talk about her a little bit? Armina Treffen. How is she sympathetic?

Well, one of the things about the Weimar era was that women were taking jobs and doing things that they hadn't been allowed to do before (another element of similarity to the modern age), since the Weimar constitution, that is the for the government from the 20s until Hitler took over, was a progressive document. Anyway, I imagined a polite woman, and an attractive one, that is smart and beautiful, coming into an organization like the Berlin police department.

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Of course, this was difficult, and she struggles against contempt and resentment. But you know what? She's really good at what she does. And as part of a part of the resentment she experiences, she is assigned to those crimes in Berlin in which women were killed.

Armina is alone, and thinks this is so because the man who was meant for her was killed in the Great War, that is the first world war, and this is one of the things that makes her so furious in her pursuit of people who are killing women in Berlin.

And if her morality, her angle of attack has a sort of history, from the writer's point of view, I'd say that since I have internalized Albert Camus so completely, that probably some of his resistance, his decency, his morality comes into play here. Armina resists what is happening as a sort of defiance. She takes this personally and feels that she is attached to other human beings in a moral way, and that her failure to stop what is happening is a personal matter, not something that is a job. She is attached to humanity and thinks her job is to stop the violence she sees.

So, as far as being sympathetic is concerned, she is moral (in the most profound way, not simply doctrinaire), concerned about other human beings, stands up to difficulty without flinching (at least outwardly), is capable of great love, if not passion, and takes the chance when the possibility of love comes along.

But she does meet a man, doesn't she?

Yes, she does. And this is something else I wanted to write about and which is often ignored in modern fiction. Armina recognizes a man, who recognizes her: they really do understand each other, and are able to communicate, not by words, but by touch, by giving each other small presents, by a series of actions that show how much they understand the most delicate aspects of each other's feelings.

And, in fact, one of the great pleasures of writing this book is that I got to write a love letter. I enjoy writing letters, and I have been looking for a way to get a letter into a book for a long time.

What about sex?

In looking into Berlin, I found that it was somewhat like our own era, in that sex had become a commodity (without the internet, but in any case), and that it seemed even kinkier than what you could find by looking into the corners, say, of New York City.

Can you give us an example?

There are many. For instance, there were Medicine Girls, women under the age of consent, in their teens, who were used because men thought that sleeping with younger women was good for their health. But the category of excess that immediately caught my attention was what is known as a Gravelstone.

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What is a Gravelstone?

A woman who had a deformity of some kind that was erotically appealing. It seems odd, in an age of devotion to looking perfect, that there should be an interest in deformities of one kind or another. These women, with a deformity, were almost always prostitutes.

A Gravelstone is a character in the book, a young, beautiful woman who's face has been burned and scarred in such a way as to suggest that beauty is just behind the scar, struggling to get out. She works in the park, the Tiergarten, where many murders take place.

Of course, she is an informer. Her customers, both men and women, tell her all kinds of things, which she sells to the various political factions in the city.

What other work did you do to write this book?

Well, I went to Berlin, but, of course, it was almost totally destroyed in the bombing of the war, although some buildings survived. I was interested in the landscape, the river, and the landmarks that did survive. I spent some time with a woman who was the director of the Berlin Police Museum, which is out by the airport. I went to the Tiergarten, where a lot of the action takes place.

What difficulties does Armina face in trying to work her way through the crimes she faces, that is the killing of women?

I found a book, a history of the Berlin police department in the 1920s, and it gave a breakdown of the political complexion of each precinct. One precinct was perfectly divided between left and right, and I wondered what it would be like to work there, especially when any crime had the least political overtone. She works in one of these.

The book ends with a section in Berlin after the war. Why did you want to include this?

This is one of those things that is hard to explain, as I said in the beginning, because it comes out of something so deep and hard to describe. But I have long wanted to write about complete chaos, the absolute heart of the heart of darkness, where everything has come unglued. Surely, Berlin in the summer of 1945 was like that.

Frankly, it is hard to find out what really happened there, since the Germans are reticent about it, and, in fact, one of my inspirations here was W.G. Sebald, who began to try to open the door to this part of human experience that has been sealed up. But, as nearly as I can tell, with gangs of one kind or another loose in the city, with the Russians out of control at times, with the desperation of the people left to survive, it seemed like a European Heart of Darkness. And, of course, it is here that one of the concerns of the book reveals itself.

That is, no matter how hard we struggle, and no matter how we are successful against the horrors we face (as in WWII), something seems loose in human affairs, and we must be constantly on guard against it. Of course, we defeated it in Germany and in

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Europe in the 40s, but it keeps coming back, and that is another aspect that makes me think of the modern aspect of this book. That is, the killing of one group by another is still going on, whether in Rwanda or other places. We don't defeat it once, but we have to be alert to it constantly.

In fact I was going to include a quotation, in the beginning of The Informer from a survivor of the Rwanda genocide, just to remind the reader that these things aren't isolated. But I thought that would be hammering the reader on the head. So I left it out.

What was it?

A comment by a twelve year old boy, Cassius Niyonsaba, who had survived a slaughter outside a church. He said, "I saw how savagery can replace kindness in the heart of a man...."

About Craig Nova

Craig Nova is the award-winning author of twelve novels, including The Good Son and Cruisers. His next book, The Informer, will be published in February 2010.

His writing has appeared in Esquire, The Paris Review, The New York Times Magazine, and Men's Journal, among others. He has received an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 2005 he was named Class of 1949 Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

For more information about Craig Nova, visit www.craignova.com