

Interview with Dana Copithorne **Author of *The Steam Magnate***

Reader Views would like to welcome Dana Copithorne, author of the imaginative fantasy novel “The Steam Magnate.” Dana is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Welcome to Reader Views Dana, and thanks for talking with us today. Would you start off by telling us the storyline of your new novel, “The Steam Magnate”?

Dana: Hi Juanita, and thanks for inviting me to be interviewed. The story is basically one of personal transformations and dynamics, set in a surreal landscape that is both futuristic and archaic. The story develops along a course that is different from many fantasy/sci fi novels, and while there is certainly action and intrigue, the story is mostly of how each of my characters creates and moves through their reality through their decisions and actions. There has been a betrayal between two powerful characters before the start of the story, and it’s the whims and designs of these two that shape the rest of the story. Deals are forged and broken, natural and supernatural power balances shift, and the characters find themselves in situations that would have been unimaginable at the beginning of the story. It’s hard to describe the actual storyline without giving it away!

Juanita: What inspired you to write this novel?

Dana: Several things came together in the writing of this novel. I wanted to create something that would exaggerate and evoke the more interesting elements of life, through the creation of a surreal world. I wanted to write something that would make the reader feel strongly for the people and places in the book, while be uplifting in a basic way. It is sort of like creating a ‘virtual reality’ that a reader or I can step into and feel surrounded by interesting things. At first, it was just great for me to have this place to step into when I was writing. Then, about a quarter of the way into writing what I thought was to be a novella, I got the publishing deal with Aio. From that point on, there was the exciting prospect that others too could enjoy my writing! As I wrote more, it became a deeply internal experience, as well as an external experience of working with an editor, and having my first readers. So basically, I was first inspired by my own wish to create something unique, and then by the support of others who let me know that they value my work!

Juanita: Would you tell us a little more about your lead characters?

Dana: There are three lead characters. Eson gains power and influence over others through the contracts that he forges with them. He is constantly striving to increase his power in the world, and

to honor his ancestors through his actions. He is often the character people are most fascinated with, as he represents an enchanter figure who tempts us in with his charismatic words, his enlightened and worldly observations. He is neither a 'good guy' nor a 'bad guy' but a conflicted and sometimes cryptic character.

Kyra is nearly the polar opposite of Eson. She comes from a position of little power, and works more through the mediums of stealth and spontaneous impulse than overt control of her world. She is unpredictable, but takes action when it's needed and develops quite a bit throughout the story. Jado is a young friend of Kyra's and a sort of apprentice to Eson. He has his own dreams for his future, and being in Eson's circle of influence both helps him and gives him trouble. He travels to a city far from his home, and faces mysterious challenges, with unusual results.

Juanita: How did the characters evolve in the writing process?

Dana: Eson quickly evolved into the driving catalyst of the plot, while Kyra's character was the one who developed in a slower but ultimately more definite way. Eson is a strong force in the story, but we wonder if he is really making progress, or if he is only outrunning some part of himself. Kyra is a deceptive, even irresponsible person at the beginning of the story, but she becomes a stronger person throughout. By the end of the writing process, they'd evolved into complex people. Jado's character stayed the most linear. He is an easy-going person who sometimes lets things slide, so he evades inner change, while his circumstances change greatly.

Juanita: Would you explain the Broken Glass City, the setting of your story?

Dana: Most of the story takes place in this city. It is a place etched by many layers of history, and many cultures. The places within it are steeped in meaning and there are many unique works of architecture, such as a monument made of meteor shards, and a bank covered in sliding glass panels that describe economic flux. There are also small, simple places such as glass gardens, and deserted fountains that are used as shrines. A landmark in Jado's community is a glass mosaic said to be a celestial calendar from ancient times.

Juanita: What are your thoughts on the mythical and magical aspect of "The Steam Magnate"?

Dana: I use the mythical and magical elements of the story to highlight or heighten the themes that I deal with, and to present them in an entertaining and innovative way. Magic power generators and parchments, a bird that acts as a flying camera, and a robot mouse that can spy by burrowing into the walls of a building all find their place in the book. The magic contracts are a way of talking about power relations and inequalities, while I also wanted to bring in the issue of electrical power and environmental power sources. I wanted there to be "just enough" of a magical element. As to the myths, I use them also to create depth in the cultures I'm inventing, and to give the characters belief systems to guide them in their lives. Every culture has myths, whether secular or spiritual.

Juanita: Dana, you use your own artwork on the front/back cover of your book, plus line drawings interspersed in the text. Would you comment on your beautiful artwork, and the significance of your two watercolor pieces?

Dana: Thank you! I've always *loved* doing artwork, even before I became seriously interested in writing. I did the artwork for this book after writing the draft, so it was a wonderful closing and finishing activity. I also found that I could work on the art in cafes, while most of the writing took place at home. I love architecture, and the visual environment of cities and natural places. For the painting on the cover of this book, I wanted to create a 'window' into the world of the story. Eson is pictured here, and as in the story, his appearance is sketched very generally. I came up with some buildings that I thought would look right in the glass city, and drew them in. Eson was now looking out over the city, framed by the trees in his glass garden, but the picture didn't look complete. Adding the roiling, vivid sky made the picture take life! The maple leaf balances out the composition of the painting, and points out that I'm a Canadian author. The inner illustrations are very carefree, spontaneous sketches, which I hope convey the playful yet detailed nature of the story.

Juanita: How did this "The Steam Magnate" unfold onto paper? Would you tell us more about your wistful and unique writing style?

Dana: Thanks! Basically, the style develops from various influences, and from my own wish to create a mood through words. Much of it comes from meditation traditions, and a book I read on Zen aesthetics. In Zen thought, an ethereal or otherworldly quality with a toned down or deceptively simple mood create the conditions for deep experience of art and life. I want the writing style to convey much, without being heavy or bland. While I have never written poetry, I'd like my prose to have some of the density and depth that good poetry has.

Juanita: What writers have had the most influence on you?

Dana: There are so many! In terms of style, Angela Carter springs to mind, as well as the Sufi poets, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, The anonymous writer of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", Junichiro Tanizaki, Soseki Natsume, Lady Murasaki, and probably a lot of other things I read but don't remember being influenced by. In terms of content, again Carter, many science fiction authors, and Murdoch for plot structures, but not science fiction elements. I've also read a lot of contemporary authors lately, Janet Turner Hospital, Dionne Brand, Andrew Sean Greer, Michael Ondaatje, among others I think I've learned from.

Juanita: Would you say there are any similarities between you and your perceptions of the world, and the free-flowing atmosphere of your book?

Dana: Well, ideally, yes, but in actuality... I'd like it if the world were in such a leisurely position as my story. I would like reality to be more free flowing and less problematic than it is for most of the world. At its best, life is such a free-flowing experience.

Juanita: Dana, are there any aspects of being a Canadian, or living in Canada that have influenced your writing?

Dana: Yes, I think being Canadian and living in Canada has been a large part of my writing. Because many cultures are in one place in Vancouver, there are many opportunities to meet people from other countries, and to learn about other cultures. Though my book doesn't literally take place

in Canada, there is a certain Canadian character or style that's made its way into the book. Traveling abroad was inspiration for my work as well, both to Europe and Japan, but it was when I came back to Canada that I had the peace and mental space to write the book. As a magic realist or speculative literary author, I'd like to contribute my perspective to both Canadian Literature and to the literature of the world at large.

Juanita: Dana, what is the underlying message of "The Steam Magnate"?

Dana: I would have to say that the underlying message is of the interconnectedness of people, actions and the world around them. As Donne said, "No man is an island unto himself." (Though it feels that way sometimes when you're writing a novel!) The message would be for understanding and compassion, but also of the complexities of playing this out in reality. People can often hide behind delusions and complexities in their accountability to the world and other people. This is not a moral story, but an exploration of how ambiguous and contingent on chance life can be.

Juanita: This is your first novel Dana. Do you have plans for your next book? How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Dana: Yes, I am already a good way into my second book, which will be a sequel of sorts, but also give insights into Eson's past (so also a prequel in a way). Ideally, I'd like to write a series that a reader could enjoy in any order, linked but not linear the way a traditional series would be. I'd like to write an additional book for each of the three main characters, as their stories are only beginning in "The Steam Magnate".

Readers can find a wealth of information about my book as well as novels by Zoran Zivkovic, Ian R. MacLeod and Jus Neuce on Aio's website: www.aiopublishing.com
Follow the links to the novels' titles and find each author's page, plus ordering information, reviews, excerpts, and author interviews. As well, we are having a contest for readers to invent a name for the nightclub that appears in my story. Details are on Aio's site.

For more samples of my artwork, readers can visit: <http://www.geocities.com/danacopithorne/>

More excerpts and info are also available on Jeff Vandermeer's blog site for the week of Oct. 30 to Nov. 7, 2006. www.vanderworld.blogspot.com

Juanita: Dana, thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. You are a truly talented new author, and we are grateful to have the chance to hear more about you and your stunning debut. We strongly encourage readers to delve into your imaginative and intriguing novel, "The Steam Magnate." Do you have any last thoughts today?

Dana: Thanks, Juanita, I've enjoyed the interview. I hope that my book provides a meaningful and vivid experience to readers, and become of those that calls readers back into its subtle, atmospheric world. Each person who reads it adds their own stream of perceptions, and so contributes to the creative process. I invite readers to make my story a part of their inner world.