



**An interview with writer Daniel Levin**  
*by Elisabetta Bolondi*

**- Were you influenced by the success of Dan Brown books and films in the decision to set “The last ember” in Rome?**

The Last Ember is about salvaging the flame of history. Characters race from the labyrinths beneath the Colosseum to the biblical tunnels of Jerusalem. As a modern-day thriller about history, what better settings than Rome and Jerusalem?

When starting The Last Ember, I hadn't read any other mystery novels set in Rome, but whether writing about the Renaissance or ancient history, it's the perfect modern setting to evoke the importance of the past. Yes, historical suspense novels are popular these days, aren't they?! Readers have a craving for history, and I think that's good.

Other novels bring the renaissance alive, but The Last Ember uniquely breathes life into the ancient world. I open the novel with a naked woman floating in honey inside an ancient column. That is a metaphor for how “alive” I wanted the ancient world to feel in the novel. Not just dusty bones, but a preserved Roman princess – her skin still flush from the moment of death.

**- How much time did you spend in researching and studying in order to reconstruct in such a thorough way Flavio Giuseppe historical way from his times to ours?**

Ancient spies fascinated me. I tried to map out my research, but every time I opened up the text of an ancient historian, I kept seeing things like a strange translation of the Latin, an errant mark in the margin, or some unexplained notation. Those things stirred my imagination and the story kept changing, making it more and more believable.

The historical mysteries in The Last Ember are real. So, too, with Flavio Giuseppe, the research is real. We know that some strange things happened in Emperor Titus' palace after he returned from sacking Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Everyone within the emperor's immediate circle — his mistress, Berenice, his court historian, Flavio Giuseppe, his favorite stage actor Aliterius, were either executed or mysteriously disappeared. Titus himself went mad and, on his deathbed, his parting words were, “I have made only one mistake.” Piecing all of these things together required a lot of research. The research was very important.

Another example was the naked princess I describe perfectly preserved floating in ancient oils. In the ancient Roman world, some corpses really were submerged in honey, amber, and other oils. I knew the possibilities in Rome were rich.

**- The Arab-Israeli conflict was very important for you to decide the plot of your novel: could you please tell us what do you think about this serious international problem?**

The secretive Islamic land trust I describe in the novel – The Waqf Authority—is real. Since the 11th century, they have controlled the Temple Mount. In 1999, they illegally removed 20,000 tons of archaeologically rich rubble – mostly Christian and Jewish artifacts -- from The Temple Mount in order to deny that there are any Judeo-Christian artifacts there. That is when the first narrative question of *The Last Ember* arose in my mind: What if someone wanted to control not just the future, but the past?

I have an explosion beneath the Temple Mount. That archaeological terrorism is a metaphor for how fragile all of our cultural heritages are. We must make peace with each other's past in order to make peace in the present.

**- I wonder if the character of Jonathan Marcus is, in some way, autobiographical, because of the time you spent in Rome. Is that true?**

The antiquities trade is a very bloody business. When we meet Jonathan, he's no boy scout. He's practical, putting his immense knowledge of the ancient world to very profitable use in defending less than scrupulous antiquities dealers. I've always found the moral tension of the antiquities trade fascinating. We see these ancient artifacts in museums, glistening in their display cases, but some are soaked in the blood of the trade. Being caught in the middle of all this, as a lawyer, seemed a good place to introduce a compelling character. In other words, yes, he's using his talents to defend these dealers, but on the other hand, you can tell there's a real passion for the ancient world.

So, too, I was in the antiquities trade, and I can assure you, it's a very bloody business!

**- Did you really have the opportunity to know the Ministry of cultural heritage, the Iccrom and the "Carabinieri del nucleo patrimonio artistico"?**

Unlike other historical mysteries, all of the institutions in *The Last Ember* are real. Many of the characters are based on real people! I had the opportunity to extensively visit Iccrom and the "Carabinieri del nucleo patrimonio artistico."

I was also a visiting scholar at the Academy in '05. What an experience. It's located in a 19th century villa on the Janiculum Hill, with a wonderful rare books library. All the Renaissance manuscripts were there, at my fingertips. Even more incredible were the Fellows, I had a great time listening to them share secrets of the ancient world over a beer at the local enoteca.

Iccrom really is based in that wonderful monastery. The character of Emili Travia is based on the adventurous and beautiful Dr. Simona O'Higgins, who took me into the depths of the Domus Aurea. Comandante Profeta's men are based on Generale Giovanni Nisti's staff at the Comando della Tutela del Patrimonio Culturale. They gave me a helpful tour. Any of the deadly deception in the carabinieri is my own invention!

**- I hope you don't mind if I tell you that I found a little mistake in your book: Piazza Navona have been a promenade from many years, as for the area around the Colosseum. Is it a sort of poetic license to make pass there some cars at high speed?**

Thanks, but is that really a mistake? Those are police cars that are speeding. Since when do the Carabinieri obey the speed limit! If they were going slowly, that would have been poetic license.