

IRENICON

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

When will IRENICON be in book shops?

Jo Fletcher Books will publish IRENICON in May 2012. Mayan prophesies notwithstanding, part II of the trilogy comes out 2013, part III in 2014.

Where did you get the idea for IRENICON?

I studied sculpture in Florence. While crossing the old bridge one day, I started thinking about Machiavelli's and da Vinci's madcap scheme to flood Pisa by diverting the Arno. What if it had worked? That's where the idea started.

How did IRENICON get published?

Ian Drury of Sheil Land Associates helped me get the manuscript into shape to show publishers. Jo Fletcher Books is the new Fantasy/SF imprint of Quercus (the publishers of Steig Larson). I count myself blessed to have Jo editing my first book; she's a generous and imaginative editor. Her keen eye was honed working with the likes of Ursula K. Le Guin, Terry Pratchett, Arthur C. Clarke, Andrzej Sapkowski, Dan Simmons, and Neil Gaiman.

Did you research IRENICON?

IRENICON is set in 14th Century Italy and the best guides to that troubled country are Barbara W. Tuchmen and Frances Stonor. With any historical fiction, research is key (also a great way to procrastinate). The point's not to gather trivia to bore the reader but to learn to appreciate the variety of human experience; it's easy to assume contemporary mores are universal and eternal. I like stories that whip that safety blanket away.

What genre is IRENICON? Is there really a martial art involving flags?

IRENICON is a Historical Fantasy – more specifically, it's a medieval martial arts epic. Flag kung fu might exist somewhere, but the *Art Banderia* is an invention based on the Italian folk tradition of flag-throwing. There are annual festivals around Tuscany where “sbandieratori” put on flag throwing displays. It would be a terribly impractical way to fight, but it's generally accepted that the coolness of a Kung Fu technique is in inverse proportion to the square of how unrealistic it is.

Where is IRENICON set?

IRENICON is set in a counter-factual medieval Italy. A few more feet of water would have changed European history and, as you can see from the map, it's waterlogged. Everything has gone awry; this is a world where the Romans failed to supplant the Etruscans. IRENICON takes place centuries later. There's a messy world war, analogous to the Hundred Years war, going on in Europe.

Post-medieval Italy was reduced to a political football as power migrated to the more stable centralized states of the continent, but the rise of Concord changes that in IRENICON. Concord aims to be a continental power but must first secure its southern flank, a chaos of half-beaten city states. The Concordians use bridges the way the Romans used roads: you get less rebellions when better trained, better equipped armies can reach the provinces fast. IRENICON is the story of what happens when a Concordian engineer tries to build a bridge in feud-ridden town called Rasenna.

Is Rasenna based on a real place?

It's a composite. Imagine Italy with a narrow waist, Rasenna is smack bang in the bottleneck. Rasenna's and Concord's rivalry parallels that of medieval Sienna and Florence. Rasenna is a city of towers. There's a mural in the Orsanmichelle that shows Florence with a skyline like Manhattan. Now it's full of stocky pallazzi, but there are many northern Italian towns – Sienna, Perugia, Assisi and Verona – where the 14th century isn't so trampled on. The difference is obvious: their towers are still standing. To give an idea of scale, the tallest tower in San Gimignano, Torre Grossa, is 54 meters (177 feet).

What about the villainous Concordians and the tyrant Bernoulli?

Concord is like Avignon during the papal schism, but lit by the revolutionary fervour of a cadre of proto-scientists. IRENICON asks what if the industrial revolution had happened in renaissance Italy; only a lack of raw materials, fuel and metal, was stopping it – the great ship yards of Venice had all the efficiency we associate with division of labour. The wild card in IRENICON is – *ahem* – an evil genius. Girolamo Bernoulli (named after a talented but blameless family of Swiss mathematicians) is a half Brunelleschi, half Savonarola figure who overthrew the church, and fused medieval and Newtonian thought to create the mysterious super weapon that let Concord become powerful.

Religion is an important theme in IRENICON. Why is the Madonna so central?

In Catholicism, especially Italy's variety, the Madonna has powers of intercession greater than any saint. In IRENICON, I take it a step further and make Mary, rather than Her son, founder of the church. What if Herod succeeded in killing Mary's baby? If Jesus never grew up, never preached, and

never sacrificed himself, Christianity as we know would never have happened. I explore this Redemption-postponed idea in greater depth in the second book.

There are lots of Italianate words in IRENICON; how long is a “braccia”?

A braccia was a unit of measurement used in the Tuscan wool trade. Meaning “arm”, it’s about half a meter/ 1.9 feet.

I use many medieval Italian terms in IRENICON. Anyone writing a fiction set in a non-English setting is haunted by Umberto Eco's warning of "those bad novelists who, introducing a French character, make him exclaim “Parbleu!” and “La femme, ah! la femme!” but I believe great Fantasy should take the reader to a strange place and then leave room for his imagination. Obscurity for its own sake is unforgivable but it drives me mad when characters stop to explain their culture like museum guides.

What’s your favourite book? Who’s your favourite fictional hero?

My favourite book is THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY by GK Chesterton. My favourite hero is my favourite villain too: the indomitable Gully Foyle of Alfred Bester’s THE STARS MY DESTINATION. Really great characters are too busy chasing their obsessions to court the reader’s affections.

Who is your biggest inspiration?

The artists I admire most are those with inimitable vision; artists like Blake or Schiele, writers like Peake or Lovecraft, filmmakers like Miyazaki and Leone. Jerry Seinfeld said, ‘The whole object of comedy is to be yourself and the closer you get to that, the funnier you will be,’ and I think that’s true of every craft.

In terms of inspiration for IRENICON, Peter Ackroyd’s HAWKSMOOR looms large in the Bernoulli sections. Ackroyd smashes together past and present London to illustrate how history, memory and architecture mould us.

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