

Sleeper agents sure to keep you awake: Q&A with novelist Michael Pennington

by

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Revitalizing old concepts by giving them fresh twists isn't usually the easiest means to launch a new series of novels. But in 2009, writer Michael Pennington did just that with his debut adventure, *Zhena*. The old concept is that of sleeper agents trained by the Russians to be re-activated by sounds while they were living under deep cover, thinking they are just everyday people. Remember Charles Bronson in *Telephon* (1977)? But what if the sleepers are women trained to infiltrate the American military by marrying officers, becoming wives who have been chemically-induced to forget their true identities? What if these women are forgotten about for 20 years until, long after the Cold War has ended, a Russian agent thinks now would be the time to re-awaken the network for the glory of the new Russia?

To complicate the stew, what if the sleepers aren't properly reactivated and have no idea why they suddenly have skills and knowledge they didn't know they had? Or why they have strange voices inside their heads telling them how to avoid strange men trying to capture or kill them? What if one of these sleepers is intelligent and resourceful enough to outfox her new foes while being forced to dig into her own past, a past she slowly realizes isn't her own?

That's part of the set-up for the fast-paced *Zhena*, and to say much more would be to provide spoilers for a book hard to put down. Every page is full of new surprises as one Susan Anderson, military wife, mother, and apparent orphan, finds herself on the run trying to protect her children, the lives of friends, not to mention maintaining her own sanity and survival. What makes this thriller one of the best debut novels in many a moon is the realism and intelligence that runs throughout the story. Susan Anderson is on her own, adaptable, dueling with two levels of consciousness that keep her alive—one is a merciless voice that knows how to kill, another has to keep the identity she has known for 20 years intact.

If that doesn't whet your appetite for this book, maybe what author Michael Pennington has to say about it will. Below is a special Q&A for Spywise.net that should send you looking for a book sure to keep you awake at least one night—once you start this ride, it's hard to get off—

Q: Tell us a bit about your background, which I gather is mostly in the navy?

A: I am a Commander in the United States Navy. I have been in the Navy for eighteen years and I've spent most of that time in the submarine force. I am currently stationed at

the Naval War College in Newport, RI. I am a graduate of Purdue University with a bachelors and masters degree in physics.

My current job requires me to be on the road a great deal. As a result, I spend a lot of time in airports and hotels. I've had numerous ideas for books in the back of my head over the years. This was my first opportunity to actually put one of them on paper.

Q: Your book seems built on considerable research. What were your starting points and what investigations did you find most useful?

A: While I did do research for the book, most of it is actually based on places I have been or events I have been involved in. People always say, write about what you know. I tried hard to stick to that with *Zhena*. It was surprising how much easier it made it to write.

I did do some nominal research on hypnosis and mind control. However most of it is purely artistic license at least as far as I know. I've definitely never heard of anyone being under for more than twenty years.

Q: What interested you in sleeper agents? Did you find it at all a bit difficult to update a concept explored in other films and novels?

A: I tend to have a very active imagination. Sometimes I like to just sit back and ask myself, "What If?" When I start writing, I generally have no idea how the story is going to end. I just take an idea based on the "What if" and then see where it logically takes me.

I actually came up with this idea twenty years ago when I was a college student. At the time I was going through the extensive process of obtaining my initial security clearance. I realized a sleeper agent based on the person's wife could work. One day about a year and a half ago I realized with the Russians starting to exert their power again, the idea of "forgotten" sleeper agents based on my original premise was perfect.

Q: While Creating Susan Anderson, did you have any aspects of Jason Bourne in mind? The fact she has chemically-induced amnesia which results in her tapping into resources she didn't know she has seems very Boernesque, to coin a term.

A: When I came up with the original idea, I had never read any of Ludlum's novels. While I have always been a fan of Tom Clancy, until the first Bourne movie came out, I was never introduced to Ludlum's work. After I saw the first film, I immediately read all the Bourne novels. Seeing the movies and reading the books did help me to come back to my original idea. However I would like to point out that Susan's amnesia was originally voluntary while Bourne's was caused by a shot to the head.

Q: Do you feel any Tom Clancy influences in your first novel?

A: I like to think I learned my character development from Clancy. I always enjoy the way he gives the reader a full background for nearly every character in his books. That way the reader truly has a chance to understand each character's motivation throughout the story. I want my readers to connect with my characters and be eager to see what happens to them. By giving them a full and robust background as Clancy does, I increase the chance of that happening.

Q: I was impressed with the fact that Susan, even without "Sasha consciousness," is a capable, intelligent, and resourceful woman. How did you develop her character?

A: That's an excellent question no one has ever asked me before. I would have to say she is a composite of every military spouse I've ever known. If you've never known a military spouse you can't understand the difficulties they go through. I can't think of any other profession that requires a spouse to be able to maintain a household including bills, children, cleanliness, and social functions, not to mention their own career, entirely on their own while their husband or wife literally disappear for months at a time if not longer. All the while maintaining a positive attitude with the full knowledge that once their spouse finally comes home, they will almost certainly have to do it all over again not just once, but multiple times throughout their military career.

Q: The story strikes me as a quasi-detective thriller that would work very well on the large or small screen. Did you have any cinematic elements in mind during your creative process as in the settings, pace, or scenes?

A: It is my ultimate dream to see Zhenya on either the large or small screen. When I'm writing I generally try to visualize the scene in my head. This helps me to create both a realistic scenario and dialogue. The better I'm able to get the reader to have the same vision as myself, the more they'll relate to the story and want to read more. One of my goals when I write is to never have the reader say, "Oh come on that would never happen." As long as you accept my basic premise, I want the reader to be able to relate to the characters on some level and feel they would react in a similar manner given the situation. The same idea can easily be transferred to a movie.

Q: Do you see Zhenya as pure escapism or is it intended to explore any themes in terms of contemporary intelligence?

A: As I mentioned, it was the resurgence of Russia on the international stage that convinced me the time was right for the book. It is entirely plausible that with the rapidity and suddenness of the collapse of the Soviet Union, some spies or other operatives could have been left behind and they merely decided to continue their lives here rather than return to the chaos that Russia turned into. Moreover, with Russia's return, it's possible someone could now come looking for them and expect them to start work again.

Q: What are your favorite reader responses to your book so far? Are there any criticisms you find interesting?

A: My favorite response is the people who say they can't put it down. I recently had a friend make a facebook entry cursing me for the sleep she lost because once she got to the half way point she was unable to stop reading. The most interesting criticism was from someone who had a hard time believing the number of facts and details some of the characters could recall after twenty years. I responded stating that I made sure the characters who had such recall were people trained for that or who had a predisposition toward organization and detail such as the police detective and the woman who ran Susan's orphanage.

As a submarine officer, I work with a number of very intellectual people who have amazing abilities of recall and can rapidly recite facts or remember events from months or even years before.

Q: You have a sequel in the pipeline—does this mean Susan Anderson will return? What can you tell us about your next book?

A: My second book is entitled *Dohch*. There are many unanswered questions surrounding Susan which I left purposefully left open. There are many people both friends and enemies who are interested not only in Susan, but in the other women left behind as well. In the second book it will become even more difficult for Susan to keep the truth about herself from her family while simultaneously keeping them safe and unlocking the secrets of her past.

Q: When can we expect to see it out?

A: I just finished my first draft last night. I'll take the next month or so and review it to make sure everything makes sense and add some more backstory etc. Then I'll send it to my publisher for final editing and cover creation. Overall, I hope to have it out in April or May.

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