

## **PRESTON FLEMING**

Preston Fleming was born in Cleveland, Ohio. He left home at age fourteen to accept a scholarship at a New England boarding school and went on to a liberal arts college in the Midwest. After earning an MBA, he managed a non-profit organization in New York before joining the U.S. Foreign Service and serving in U.S. Embassies around the Middle East for nearly a decade. Later he studied at an Ivy League law school and since then pursued a career in law and business. He has written five novels.

### **AN INTERVIEW WITH PRESTON FLEMING**

**Q. What was your inspiration for writing *Forty Days at Kamas*?**

**A.** I was living in a place I loved and doing work I enjoyed, yet I felt a gnawing anxiety that troubled times were ahead. That was in 2000, a year before 9/11. The vision I had was of a future America that looked a lot like some of the Third World countries where I had lived, particularly Beirut during the Lebanese civil war. Because of that vision, I wrote *Kamas* to show what a failed America might look like so that people could see it coming.

**Q. Did you have a particular story in mind for *Kamas* when you conceived of it? Where did the idea of corrective labor camps come from?**

**A.** I had been slogging through Solzhenitzyn's *Gulag Archipelago* around that time when I came across the story of a prisoner revolt at a camp in Kengir, Kazakhstan, in 1953, about a year after Stalin's death. Having traveled to Russia on business many times during the early '90's, my sense was that the way the Soviet prisoners behaved in Stalinist times was not unlike how Americans might behave under similar circumstances today. So I took the basic premise of the Kengir story and brought it forward into a dystopic twenty-first century America with a focus on American themes.

**Q. Do you see the *Kamas* camp as a sort of microcosm or metaphor for present-day America? Does *Kamas* have a political message?**

**A.** I expect that readers on both sides of the political continuum will be able to identify with the characters in *Kamas*. Projection can be a wonderful thing.

**Q. When you set out to write a novel, do you begin by creating an outline or do you start with a set of characters and turn them loose, so to speak?**

**A.** My creative process has developed over the years but it tends to be more intuitive than systematic. I start with one or more characters in a situation--a "what if" concept, you might say, and then set out imagining how it might develop. As my vision of the action unfolds, and bits and pieces of inspiration hit me, I take notes on random slips of paper or in a notebook that I keep in my car. As the notes accumulate, I transcribe them into a rough outline that later becomes the working

outline for the book. Writing the chapters usually takes several months. Depending on the quality of the drafting, it may take another month or two to edit these into a first draft. And the final editing can go on and on almost indefinitely until the book is published.

**Q. Why did you stop writing spy novels and move toward stories set in a dystopian American future?**

**A.** I wrote my first two novels, both spy thrillers set in 1980s Beirut, to clear my head after eleven years of government work focused on the Middle East, most of which was in the Arab world. Though there are still things I could say about the Middle East and espionage and terrorism, the next couple of projects in my queue take place mainly in North America and are not about spying.

**Q. Some people have found *Kamas* rather dark. And *Star Chamber Brotherhood* also has a hard edge. Where does the darkness come from? Are you a dark person by nature?**

**A.** Like most people, I would say my personality is a balance of darkness and light. Darker than some, perhaps, but by no means at the far end of the scale. What makes me seem negative to some is that I'm the kind of person who wants to know the naked truth about things. If there's bad news, tell me up front so I can do something about it or at least get used to it. The darkness in my books isn't something to be wallowed in. It's meant to be overcome so that life can go on and goodness can prevail. I consider all my books life affirming or I wouldn't have written them.

**Q. Are your characters based on actual people you've known? And if so, does that extend to villains like Fred Rocco, Doug Chambers and the visiting officials from the Corrective Labor Administration? How were you able to get inside the heads of men like that?**

**A.** To be effective as a storyteller I believe I have to write about what I know. And over the years I have certainly known people cut from the same cloth as Fred Rocco, Doug Chambers, the Wart and the bosses in the Corrective Labor Administration. Right now we don't have corrective labor camps in America but I firmly believe we could have them under the proper circumstances. Let's not kid ourselves that only Germans and Russians and Chinese are capable of things like that. But going back to characters drawn from life, I don't take a person I know and make him a character in my book. What happens is that I have a vision of a character in my mind and then I take aspects of people I know and use them to describe the character I see. I might use the appearance and speech habits of someone in the real world whom I admire to describe somebody who does terrible things in my imagined world. It's an intuitive process more than a calculated one.

**Q. At what point in your life did you decide you wanted to write fiction?**

**A.** I remember the moment quite clearly. It was the late fall in my first year at boarding school. I was fourteen years old. It was during English class, my last class of the afternoon after sports, just before

dinner and nearly dark outside. We had been reading something by Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer* or something like that, and suddenly it came to me that I wanted to write novels when I grew up. I blurted out something to that effect and the instructor, who was a World War II veteran and quite the man-of-the-world, looked at me with a knowing smile and told me to go out and "live a "life of action," like Conrad. Then, if I still wanted to write, I should go do it. I never forgot that advice, which is why I turned down a Ph.D. fellowship at Berkeley after college to follow a path that a few years later led me to New York and Washington and then to the Middle East.

**Q. Have you written any screenplays or works for the stage? In that vein, would you want to have a hand in writing the screenplay that adapts *Kamas* or *Star Chamber Brotherhood* to the screen someday?**

**A.** If the opportunity arose, I imagine it might be hard to say no, though I have never written a screenplay and am not inclined to go down that road. Generally speaking, my view of the Hollywood creative process is not very positive. On balance, I would probably follow the advice of Robert Benchley, who, as I recall, suggested many years ago that the best way for a writer to make a movie deal with Hollywood is to meet the studio lawyer at the Nevada border and toss your book across the border after the lawyer tosses over the cash.

**Q. What kind of books do you read when you're not writing?**

**A.** It's an odd mix. I probably read more nonfiction than fiction, mostly history and biography, particularly war autobiography. I also listen to books on tape, especially the more difficult books like classical British literature that requires a familiarity with English regional accents. But I don't read many mysteries or thrillers, except for a few that I consider particularly well written, and that's usually years after they've been published.

**Q. One of the most striking qualities of your novels is their realism and authenticity, whether the book is set in Beirut or Basel or Boston. Your writing is spare and understated, yet it conveys a very concrete sense of time and place that many writers fail to achieve with far more words. How did you acquire your style and which writers would you say have had the greatest influence on it?**

**A.** While I don't read many contemporary spy novels or thrillers, as a young man I devoured classics of the genre by Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, Len Deighton, Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming, John Le Carré, Frederick Forsyth, and others whose storytelling, characterization and style set the standard for those that followed. Similarly, my formal education in writing and composition, both in boarding school and in college, centered on works now considered quite old-fashioned.

**Q. You noted earlier that your first two books were spy novels and that you might still have things to say about espionage and terrorism and the Middle East. Do you plan to write more spy stories any time soon?**

**A.** I have a few plot outlines of that kind in the queue but not very close to the front. For me the moral issues faced by spies and case officers and the policy makers who direct them are central to America's role in the world and its survival as a great nation. Perhaps I'll do another one based in Beirut before too long. I would enjoy going back to Lebanon to update my sense of the place.

**Q. What's coming next?**

**A.** I'm working on two projects at the moment. One is *I'll Die Later*, the third novel in the Kamas Trilogy. Many of the chapters are written but it still needs a great deal of work. The other project is a sequel to *I'll Die Later* with the same protagonist. Right now I couldn't predict when either book will be finished. So I plan to send in my two Beirut-based spy novels to be prepared for publication later this year.