

Interview with Debra Killeen, author of *A Prince in Need*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is happy to welcome back, Debra Killeen, who is here to talk about her new novel, “A Prince in Need.” I am also joined today by our fourteen-year old book reviewer, Ian McCurley, who also has some questions for Debra about the book he just read.

Debra Killeen graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1985 and spent 15 years working as a pharmacist in numerous settings—hospital, retail, and home infusion. She never found the right fit. Then, having reached her limit with managed “care,” she transitioned careers into clinical research and writing novels. Debra lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with her sister Diane and five exceptional cats—Mandy, Scott, Finn, Isis and Osiris. “A Prince in Need” is her second book in the Myrridian Cycle, following “An Unlikely Duke.”

Tyler: Welcome back, Debra. You were here last fall to tell us about the first volume in the Myrridian cycle, “An Unlikely Duke” so I’m glad you’re back to tell us about your new book. To start off, is “A Prince in Need” a sequel? If readers did not read, “An Unlikely Duke” what should they know about events in that book before they begin this one?

Debra: Tyler and Ian, it’s great to be back speaking with you. Yes, “A Prince In Need” is the sequel to “An Unlikely Duke.” However, each book tells a full story. If I’ve done my job as a writer, then when a new reader picks up “Prince” without having read the first book, they should pick up at least enough information of the events that occurred to enjoy this story. Of course, with any series, it’s much easier to know what’s going on with the repeating characters if one has read the prior books. (As an aside, when I was a teenager, I almost always started a series with the second or third book. Mary Stewart’s Arthurian saga springs immediately to my mind.)

To get back to your second question, it may be helpful for new readers to know that Chris McCabe and Elijah Holmes are travelers from our modern-day world to the medieval one of Myrridia and its neighboring kingdoms. Only in Myrridia, Magic works and is under the control of the Church, at least for now. During the first novel, Chris agreed to substitute for a Myrridian nobleman, Christian Lattimore, but Christian was murdered about the time Chris and Elijah arrived in Myrridia. “An Unlikely Duke” resolves the question of who murdered Christian and why, but does leave open another thread of the story, an attempt on Prince Robert Claybourne’s life. That question is addressed in “A Prince In Need.”

Tyler: What is the situation when “A Prince in Need” opens, and why is Chris McCabe and Helen Lattimore called upon for help?

Debra: “A Prince In Need” opens with the murder of King Reginald Claybourne of Myrridia, Robert’s father, by an unknown man. Since Chris and Helen were instrumental in solving Christian’s murder, Robert and his sister Allyson immediately think to call them for help when his father is killed. The fact that Robert and Allyson also trust Chris and Helen helps motivate them.

Tyler: I understand the situation becomes complicated by two unexpected visitors from Chris’s world. Will you tell us about these visitors and how they got to Myrridia?

Debra: Oh, yes. I have to admit, I couldn't resist the idea of bringing a couple more modern characters into the mix for this one novel, and the fact that I'd already established that Chris had had a former girlfriend, it just seemed like too much fun to bring her into the story. And I had introduced Elijah's younger sister Naomi in "An Unlikely Duke," and Naomi is the sort of person who given a chance, she'll try most anything, regardless of the potential consequences. Nicole Carpenter, Chris's former fiancée, is more hesitant, but at the same time, she wants to try to hook up with Chris again. Both women wonder why these two men haven't returned to the modern world, and hope to talk them into changing their minds.

Nicole and Naomi travel to Myrriidia the same way Chris and Elijah did—with the help of a Magically-gifted medium, Angelita Martinez, in Boston, MA. Angelita is not enthusiastic about helping them, but she has maintained a regular monthly contact with Myrriidia in case Elijah were to change his mind and return home. Angelita does insist that if the people on the other side of the portal, in Myrriidia, refuse to allow Nicole and Naomi to come over, then she's not going to let them. However, Helen and Chris agree, and things rapidly go sour between them, due to Nicole's presence.

Tyler: Debra, how do Nicole and Naomi know that Chris went to another world, and why do Chris and Helen agree to let them come to Myrriidia since Chris must figure it will cause trouble to have his ex-girlfriend around?

Debra: Naomi knew that Chris and Elijah had gone to another world, before they left during "An Unlikely Duke." Nicole's piece isn't mentioned in detail during "A Prince In Need," but she hadn't had much success in relationships after her break-up with Chris, and so she went looking for him, to see if he'd be interested in trying again. When she couldn't find *him*, she went looking for Elijah, since she'd known Elijah while dating Chris. By this point, she was really wondering what was going on, and contacted Elijah and Naomi's mother. Esther decided that if Naomi and Nicole followed the men to Myrriidia, that maybe they'd have a chance to convince the guys to come home, so she and Naomi let Nicole know what had happened. At first Nicole didn't believe them, but she really didn't have any other explanations, either. And Esther came across as a no-nonsense kind of woman...

Tyler: Tell us a little bit about the sorceress, Cecilia? Why is she a threat to Chris's position as Duke of Saelym?

Debra: Cecelia is a threat to a lot of people, actually! J She bears a very strong, and completely understandable, grudge against the Duke of Saelym, Christian Lattimore, because of what he did to her family several years back, when he and Reginald Claybourne led an invading army into her family's earldom and massacred most of her family. She would have been killed at the time except that she happened to be away from the earldom. Cecelia is unaware that Christian is dead, and so wants to kill him herself. Since Chris has taken over the position, she will attack him instead, but only because she is attacking the Duke. She has no issues with Chris personally.

Tyler: How does Cecilia try to gain power over Chris?

Debra: Cecelia actually tries to use Nicole against him, by planting a Magical trigger in Nicole's mind, which would cause him to have a brain hemorrhage. However, because the Magical attack was meant for Christian, Chris isn't harmed in the least. Chris and Christian may bear an uncanny physical resemblance, but for those folks who have read "An Unlikely Duke," they know the similarity ends there.

Ian: Where did you get the inspiration for Chris?

Debra: There were a couple inspirations for Chris, actually. Of course, his frustration with the medical system of the early 21st century is my own. My original idea for "An Unlikely Duke" was to take a situation where a powerful person's life is threatened, and a substitute is called to stand in, but the original person dies anyway. The big question was then, now what happens? Chris was definitely inspired by the character of Sam Beckett on the science fiction show "Quantum Leap" as kind of a regular guy, but now he's traveling through time and space. Okay, he's a physician, but those talents have ended up playing a role in each of the novels in this series. (In fact, I could have seen Scott Bakula playing the role back in the day.) I also wanted to have a main character in the series who has no Magical gifts, to see how he reacts in various situations.

Tyler: Debra, will you tell us more about Chris's role as a physician in Myrriidia and also what his issues are with the medical system in the real world?

Debra: Chris's main job now is to be the Duke of Saelym, of course. But, he's able to put his medical training to use now and then, should folks in the castle or town get injured or ill. He is especially able to help when the children become sick.

Chris's main frustration with the modern medical system is that, from his perspective, doctors are no longer in charge of patients' care. He sees that insurance companies can dictate what drugs are given, what procedures are performed, and which lab tests get ordered, and that often patients don't receive the best option, but the cheapest. He is also frustrated with the for-profit aspect of the medical system—everyone out to make as much money as

possible, but again with the patients falling through the cracks. Chris is a compassionate person, a pediatrician by specialty, and he has been known to rebel against the medical establishment. Such as the reference during “An Unlikely Duke,” when he took his own time to sit down with a teenaged patient who’d just tested positive for HIV and was terrified of his parents finding out that he was infected, and gay.

Ian: Which character do you identify with the most?

Debra: Great question. A number of the characters have a little bit of me in them. For instance, I have now seen my own evil twin in Cecelia, and I’m not really reassured that she’s a homicidal maniac. But I don’t identify with her, at least not most of the time. I identify most with Nicole—she’s a geek with a chemistry / computer background, wears glasses, had a suburban upbringing. Except that she’s younger and thinner than me, much more knowledgeable than me about computers, and hasn’t had Lasik surgery, she’s pretty much me. Sometimes timid, but courageous when needed. I was definitely a geek back in my school days (still am) and loved chemistry and history.

Ian: Are any of your characters based on real people?

Debra: Definitely, although I can’t tell you who Edward is based upon. Allyson has a little of my sister in her, and James McDermott is named for my dad. Esther Holmes, Naomi and Elijah’s mother, is based on a woman who worked at one of the hospitals at which I also worked, who did put 4 kids through college working as a housekeeper. I plan to have a few future characters based on some folks I know. A character in my third book is based on a former coworker of my sister, and it’s not a flattering comparison. A couple of coworkers have asked for characters to be based on them. Careful what you wish for...cue evil laugh. Actually, some of the portrayals will be flattering. But not all of them.

On a separate but related note, I’ve put cats in each of the books in this series. All of them are based on cats I’ve known, although not all have been my pets. I also plan to use my neighbor’s dog in another series.

Ian: Did you enjoy writing this book?

Debra: I loved writing this book! I had a lot of fun with the characters. Naomi is a pleasure to write, because she always says what’s on her mind, whether it’s diplomatic or not. I wish I could be that way more often, but sometimes, ya just gotta be tactful instead. The scene with her and Robert dancing more or less wrote itself. Sebastian is a wonderful character, too, more of an anti-hero than hero or villain. He’s got a strong sense of honor and fair play (which is me coming out again), and he and Naomi’s stories are not done. (There will be a separate spin-off series with them. Ask me if you’d like to know more.) And Edward is absolutely my most favorite character to write—because he’s so obnoxious and unlikeable, and yet he’s one of the good guys. Sort of.

Ian: Do you feel that this is better or worse than your other books?

Debra: Tough question! In full honesty, I feel that this is a better book than “An Unlikely Duke,” mainly for technical reasons. By the time I began writing “A Prince In Need,” I already had a comfort level with the characters and my writing itself was improving. Plus, I didn’t have to use a significant part of the book to get into the meat of the story—“Prince” jumps right in with Reginald’s murder. There was really no set-up needed, as there was in “An Unlikely Duke.” As far as these two stories go, I’d be hard pressed to say which is better—both have their strong points.

Tyler: Debra, will there be a third volume about Myrriidia?

Debra: YES! There will be a total of five books in this series. I’ll give you a teaser about the 3rd one, which will hopefully be coming out early next year. It’s called “Legacy of the Archbishop” and opens with another murder. (I’ve read a lot of murder mysteries in my time.) This time it’s Myrriidia’s archbishop, Francis McHenry, who is poisoned. Edward gets his ambitions satisfied by being named the new archbishop, but it doesn’t turn out exactly as he’d planned. Part of the problem is the return of an old enemy of his, a man named Aldric Smithson, who bears quite a grudge against Edward. Aldric is a Dark Magical practitioner, so I’m exploring a new facet to Myrriidia’s Magical systems. I get to introduce a number of new characters, some of whom will go on to do great things in the final two books of the series.

In conjunction with the previous question, this book has been the favorite of a number of my early readers so far and has generated the least critical feedback. Of course, the 5th book is still in very rough draft form.

Tyler: What responses from readers have you most enjoyed receiving?

Debra: I'm always glad to hear that a reader has enjoyed the story and the character interactions. A neighbor of mine, who is NOT a big fiction reader, wanted to read them, because he thought it was cool that his neighbor was a published writer. He really enjoyed "Duke" and then "A Prince In Need." He's now giving me feedback on the later manuscripts. What surprised him the most was how much he's grown to care about the characters. That is important to me. Another thing I like to hear is from fans of fantasy—that I've surprised them with something that happens in one of the books. And from readers who are not fans of fantasy, or have never read fantasy, that they liked/loved the story. (My sister and editor falls into the non-fan group, but she's not the only one.)

Tyler: Do you have a master plan for the books about Myrridia, or did you just write the first one and when it was finished decide to write the next?

Debra: Okay, full honesty here. When I sat down to write "An Unlikely Duke," I had never attempted ANY kind of writing on this scale. A novel? By someone who had never written a really good short story? I wasn't sure I would even be able to finish it. But, by the time I reached the end of it, I knew the characters' stories weren't finished. At that point, I didn't know if the series would run for three books or more (I really didn't want to write a trilogy, as there are so many out there!), but by the time I started the 3rd book, I realized it would run for five total. (Pharmacy trivia here—pharmacy workers count pills in fives. I'm sure it's not a coincidence.)

Once I knew this would be a series of books, I didn't "decide" to write the next. The characters were telling me that there would be more. And while the fifth book ties up most of the major loose ends of this series (and not everyone "lives happily ever after"), there are hints of future potential conflicts, which will be addressed in a second series to take place in this universe. This second series will be a trilogy, where many of the characters will go on crusade to the Holy Lands. It's going to deal with religious tolerance amongst all the adventure and mayhem, which is an important topic to me.

Tyler: Debra, now that the second volume about Myrridia is finished, what have you found most challenging about writing a series?

Debra: Keeping the characters and lesser plotlines straight! J I don't think any of the characters have changed eye or hair color, but some eagle-eyed readers will let me know if they have. Another challenge has been keeping up with the overall timeline. I have a poster in my office with major dates, and biographies of many of the main characters, with descriptions, dates of birth, early events in their lives. But keeping everything in its place is my job as a writer, and I love the challenge of it.

Tyler: And what have you found most enjoyable about writing a series?

Debra: Besides the challenge of keeping the timeline in place, I love visiting with some of these folks. Okay, I don't like getting into Cecelia's head, but fortunately I don't have to spend much time there these days. Although there could be a short story or two dealing with her early days...

While it's challenging, it's also great fun to come up with new adventures / perils for the characters and find out how they will come out on the other side. Especially with Edward, but more details for that will have to wait for the 3rd book, I'm afraid.

Tyler: Will you tell us more about Sebastian and Naomi? What will your spin-off series concerning them be like? Is it the same as the spin-off series you mentioned where the characters will go on a crusade?

Debra: Of course. First, the crusade series will not be about Sebastian and Naomi. Instead, I'm going to have some fun at Sebastian's expense, I'm afraid, as he adjusts to the 21st century. Sebastian is basically a decent man, but technically, he's also a killer. He's going to need to bury the ghosts in his past, now that all of his family is gone, and leaving Myrridia is just the first step. While he doesn't repent his actions in "Prince," he's still looking for some kind of atonement.

He and Naomi will return to Boston and become involved with a group of which Angelita, the Boston medium, is a member, that investigates paranormal situations and supernatural crimes. The first book in that series has the head of this organization being kidnapped and goes from there. Ultimately, Sebastian will accept a job with this group, and the next books will likely take place in and around North Carolina, where Naomi lives (as well as myself). We have a lot of ghost stories and other hauntings around here. Although, in one of them, Esther's going to get into some trouble in Atlantic City (my original hometown), and I can only imagine what will happen the first time Sebastian gets on a plane.

This series will also give me a chance to put my neighbor's dog into my books, and one of the feral cats I have known.

Tyler: Wow, that sounds great, Debra. I'm glad to hear you're so ambitious about writing your series. Thank you so much for joining Ian and me today. Before you go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they can find there about your Myrridia series?

Debra: Tyler and Ian, it's been a pleasure. My website is www.myrridia.net and readers can find out information about upcoming books, any upcoming appearances I may be making, such as science fiction/fantasy conventions, signings, book festivals; information about myself; links to some other writers' sites; as well as some animal welfare groups, and I hope to get a teaser up for the 3rd book before too much longer, now that "Prince" is coming out in June. There is also a link where folks can email me—I do respond to all messages and love to hear from readers.

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