

Interview with Michael Kasenow, author of *The Last Paradise: A Novel*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Michael Kasenow, who is here to talk about his new novel “The Last Paradise.”

In the eighth grade, Michael Kasenow would hide from friends in the middle school library to read poetry. He says of this time, “By reading poetry one learns how to read, write and dream.” He dropped out of college at age nineteen to escape a world of drugs and the downward spiral of his friends’ lives. He traveled across America, from Michigan to Texas to New Mexico doing odd jobs—cab driver, bartender, lumberman, janitor, butcher, and rancher. Interested in science, he earned a B.S. in Geology from Eastern Michigan University in 1986, followed by an M.S. and Ph.D. from Western Michigan University. He has taught geology and hydrogeology at EMU since 1989. He is the author of fourteen environmental science books published internationally by Water Resources Publications. “The Last Paradise” is his first novel. Kasenow lives in Michigan where he is enjoying watching his son grow.

Tyler: Welcome, Michael. I’m excited to talk to you today about your new novel. To start out, tell me how you decided to focus on the town of Galveston at the turn of the century. What about this place and time caught your interest?

Michael: I’m interested in American history from about 1880 to about 1940. That’s when the country matured and went through growing pains. The Jim Crow era, that lasted from 1877 to 1964, is an intriguing time, considering its insidious nature. And Galveston is one of those exotic cities, like New Orleans and Paris. Songs have been written about it. As a geologist, I’ve taught about the tragedy of the Great 1900 Galveston Hurricane for some time now. That’s where I first became interested in the story—in the college classroom. The more I learned, the more I was intrigued. Eight thousand people died in that storm—the greatest natural disaster in U.S. history. However, almost every book I read talked about the tragedy in terms of the middle and upper classes, yet, it was the poor that suffered the most. They always do. So I started to learn about the poor, where they lived, how they handled their existence in the third richest city in the U.S.—as it was called at that time. Then it dawned on me that 1900 was knee deep in the age of Jim Crow—in the south—suddenly the storm became secondary—a metaphor—I focused in on the existence of the poor whites and blacks and how they survived during that oppression. The story is about these people, their hopes and dreams—their faith in a better future. Galveston was, in 1900, the third richest city in the nation with a promising future. “The Wall Street of the Southwest”, as the city fathers claimed. It is the perfect metaphor for the country and its current crisis. Today, at the beginning of the 21st Century, with the economy falling apart, there’s little difference—just the technology. Most

of us are trying to find our way in the changing landscape, especially with the economy collapsing. The storm we have to cut through is an economic storm, but it is still powerful, destructive, ruining families, killing people in different ways. There's still bigotry, racism, sexism. The novel speaks to Americans today—in some ways it is about today—just set in 1900.

Tyler: Michael, I assume you drew parallels between the Great Hurricane of 1900 and Hurricane Katrina as well?

Michael: The comparisons are striking. Both Galveston and New Orleans probably experienced Category 4 Hurricanes. We're not sure about Galveston, because wind ripped off the wind gauge from its station early in the storm. But when two-ton church bells are blown from steeples, you can assume a mighty wind. Both cities were flooded by the Gulf, but also, by Northern water bodies. To the north of Galveston is Galveston Bay; to the north of New Orleans is Lake Pontchartrain. These waters flooded southward, while the Gulf Water encroached northward. Both cities could have taken better precautions. For reasons not articulated, Galveston refused to build a seawall—until after the 1900 storm. New Orleans is losing wetlands at an alarming rate. Wetlands act as a buffer against storm wind and floodwater. Not building seawalls or losing wetlands will only increase Hurricane damage. In both cases, evacuations could have been better. In fact, according to witnesses, the Hurricane Flag was not raised on the Weather Bureau's roof, in Galveston, until the storm had reached the island. There are contrasts that can't be overlooked. After the Galveston storm, the Nation responded immediately with donations—clothing, food, tents, money etc... Ships brought in supplies almost immediately. The Red Cross arrived within a couple of days. After Katrina, well, our government is still trying to clear up the paper work and find the allocated money—the response was at best anemic. Galveston, which was only about eight feet above sea level at its highest point, before the storm, lifted and poured sand from the Gulf and raised the island to fifteen feet above sea level. And they did build a competent seawall. Our government is rebuilding the New Orleans levees and other flood structures to resist a Category 3 Hurricane. Katrina was a 4, and most likely a 5 while in the Gulf. If I had to bet on which city will survive the next Category 4 or 5 storm, I'd say it's Galveston. New Orleans is still losing its wetlands. And of course the poor suffered the most. The poor were left behind. We saw that with Katrina. In regard to Galveston, miles and miles of city blocks were wiped out. One fourth of the city died in that storm. Twenty thousand were searching for loved ones. Half the city was dead or homeless.

Tyler: Michael, I mentioned in your introduction above that you traveled across America as a young man. Did you visit Galveston at that time, and if so, how has Galveston changed since the time of the novel and when you first visited it compared to now?

Michael: I lived in Houston for a couple of years in the early 1970s, and went to Galveston a few times. Back then, it was only a shell of itself, of its once great importance. I knew nothing of Galveston's history back then. A place where the wealthiest once congregated; where Europeans came to visit and vacation. The city before 1900 was on its way to rival New York and Chicago. But when I was there, it just seemed to be a dull place and run down, a druggy type of place. Actually, it was still reeling from that Great Hurricane—seventy years later—recovering economically. I didn't know it then. However, within the last forty years, Galveston has blossomed and boomed into a beautiful tourist retreat. The city really took off and exploited its natural beauty in a good way. A fine place to visit. I have not done so, not since the 70s, but the pictures are inviting. I believe it has the nickname of "Little Nawlins", with its own Mardi Gras. The Victorian Mansions have been fixed up nicely. The beaches sparkle. Streetcars are again clanging along

Broadway. The Strand is polished with fine eateries. It is again a rich place with a great promise. Very rich. A lot of people who work on the island can't afford to live there. It appears to have left its past behind and moved on, yet it celebrates its past through historic preservation. That is, until recently, when Hurricane Ike went through. It may be a sad place for a while.

Tyler: Why did you choose the title, "The Last Paradise" for the novel?

Michael: The democratic dream is the last paradise. It's the only paradise. When local and regional democracy declines, if it declines, the hope for worldwide democracy fades with it. Our experiment is the great democratic experiment—an almost mythical land where we tell the world that we can rule ourselves. And we do this with our votes and our wonderful freedom to say how we feel—to speak out, to shout out various points of views—to question, to take chances. Galveston is a metaphor for democratic rule. "A paradise built on sand." A foundation that can easily erode through crooked politics, deceit and faithless morality. A paradise that can destroy itself through greed and corruption and racial strife—through social class warfare and intolerance. We see this today with the collapse of Wall Street, housing and the banks, which has occurred due to greed and corruption. Of course there is hope at the end of the novel, after the storm, which is a metaphor for the future.

Tyler: Who are the main characters in the novel and what do you think makes them attractive to the reader?

Michael: Maxwell Hayes and Newt Haskins are two of the main characters. There's probably some bits of me in each. I understand their need to seek independence in a world that respects conformity. I never tired of Maxwell and Newt because they are good people, interesting, unpredictable, just lost and living outside the law—governmental laws, cultural rules—but not moral laws. They have their faults, and their methods are debatable in regard to outcomes, but they mean well, and at least from my point of view, they do the right things. Maxwell is strong in regard to his insight and undisciplined morality. He's wise enough to use his experience. His weakness comes from his cynical and pessimistic outlook on life, a broken past that he can't get rid of. He's a loner. Newt hides inside a bottle, hiding from a future that never happened, and he is seeking a purpose, one with meaning, a reason for going on. Isn't that what we're all doing? Bishop and Elma are ex-slaves who represent the black culture; they believe in the American dream. They have faith and hope in a better future. They are good people, as is Fanny, Maxwell's love interest, who also seeks the same dream. Their weaknesses are cultural. Bishop and Elma are blacks struggling knee deep in the age of Jim Crow. Fanny is a prostitute, who only wants the best for her son, but sexism hampers her course in life. Maxwell, Newt, Fanny, Bishop and the alley people are a pucky lot, but harmless, unless confronted—they are survivors—even before the storm. They carry a sense of humor; they work hard; many are responsible, spiritual—they just happen to be poor—outcasts. We are a nation that roots for the outcast, the downtrodden. We cherish our need for independence. These are people who have rolled along on the wheel of bad luck; made wrong choices. But there is a core of goodness in their souls.

Tyler: Will you tell us more about Maxwell and Newt's background before the novel opens and why Maxwell's past is broken?

Michael: Can't, at least not in Maxwell's case. Rumors swirl around the myth of Maxwell Hayes. Some believe he was an ex-con; some say he was once a hired killer. Others say he's running from the law. He's a loner and keeps his past to himself. But hints do come to us throughout the book, and by the end we have an idea of what kind of man he is. Maxwell went cynical after the love of

his life left him twenty years earlier. Life is filled with irony; he finds her, again, living among the upper crest in Galveston. Something he certainly wasn't looking for. And she, too, has not forgotten him. Newt spent one year in an Ivy League School, before making wrong choices. He's a card shark, or was, and for that reason, his alley friends won't let him play at the penny poker table.

Tyler: When Maxwell Hayes comes into town, one of the first things he sees is a black man hanging by a noose from a tree with a sign beside him that says "This Nigger Voted." Can you tell us more about the historical situation behind this kind of violence? How common was it, especially for such murders to be displayed in public like this?

Michael: From 1882 to 1930, about 2500 blacks were lynched in ten southern states, by lynch mobs. Some reports put the number higher. However, burning at the stake, beatings, maiming, dismemberment, castration were not uncommon. During slave days, captured runaway slaves were often branded with an "R" on the cheek. An "R" on each cheek meant that the slave had escaped and was caught twice. On the third attempt, black males were hung by their wrists in the barn or from trees and castrated. The screams sent out a message. I found no convictions of these murders in my research. If you want to be disgusted, Google "This Nigger Voted" or "Black Lynchings," then click on image, and you'll be surprised at the photos that will pop up. One photo that was printed in "Life Magazine," shows a bunch of white people, men and women, nicely dressed, standing around a tree, smiling, laughing and pointing at a lynched black man hanging from that tree. It's like Thoreau said: "Any fool can make a rule, and any fool will follow it." But let's be careful here. It's not like the north was immune to the mistreatment of minorities. Detroit, Philadelphia, Boston had their ghettos and some still do. Hence the race riots of the late 1960s. Jim Crow laws were on the books in southern states, but the rules were similar in the north, subtle, unwritten rules of law that kept minorities in their place. We've come a good ways since the age of Jim Crow, but it's a history we should not forget.

Tyler: What is the battle the poor main characters of the story face? Is it racism specifically or poverty or a mixture of several injustices?

Michael: Being black or poor in the age of Jim Crow was enough. In "*The Last Paradise*" most were running away or hiding from something. The weak are easy victims. The law pays scant attention to the poor, and it is often skeptical of their weary ways. It's easy for the corruptible to take advantage of the weak and fearful. In the age of Jim Crow many southern states passed laws stating that only those who could read could vote. Only 1% of African-Americans were literate in 1900. And there was the poll tax, aimed at both poor whites and blacks. A hefty tax that had to be paid before one could vote in an election. Few of the poor could afford the poll tax, so they couldn't vote. And a high tax on firearm purchases. Some taxes on pistols were as high as \$200. That's a good sum today, and a lot of money in 1900. Only the wealthy and the law could afford guns—legally.

Tyler: What about the villains—the rich and the corrupt of the story. Will you tell us about them please?

Michael: Boss Connor is a powerful antagonist with his tentacles in various business adventures, some legal, some illegal. His strength is his money, but his weakness is greed and the need to control—that of course spawns corruption, evil and evil intent. He's as selfish as men get. I have known such a man in my lifetime. He is an ex-slave owner who resents the Black Union, and would like to destroy it. For him, blacks are to serve whites; that's how he was raised and how he has lived his life. Hate is taught, passed down like a toxin from father to son. Jenny Connor is a pretty

woman, and that is her strength, the beauty that she uses, but her beauty is a veneer, artificial. Her weakness is the need to seek and hoard wealth, at any cost, including at the welfare of her daughter, Sara. Brood Hale and his corrupt and deadly police buddies are racists groping within a blind religion. They work for Boss Connor and enjoy the rewards of power and money that come with spreading fear. They are segments in the inheritance of hate that is passed down from generation to generation.

Tyler: Did you have historical people you used in the novel or are all the characters completely fictional?

Michael: The characters are fictional, but the alley, its people, the St. Mary Orphanage and the heroic nuns were real—my nuns are fictionalized characters—representing the nuns of 1900. Some historic people were mentioned, but in a minor way.

Tyler: Michael, what did you find most difficult about writing a historical novel?

Michael: The research. I've at least a dozen books about Galveston, its history, the Great Hurricane, on my bookshelf—books written around 1900. A lot of the stories are redundant, some of it with obvious prejudice. You have to filter through that stuff. For example, some of the 1900 books discuss the looting after the storm and blame it on the blacks. Further research dispels that myth. The same thing happened during the Katrina Hurricane. And then there's the web; you can Google or Yahoo many sites that carry the history of the hurricane, the Jim Crow south, and confirm facts. There are modern books with a better eye that lack the prejudice. Patricia Bixel and Elizabeth Turner have written a fine history, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*. And Ellen Beasley, an historic preservationist, has written *The Alleys and Back Buildings of Galveston*. Both of these are excellent. Then there's the architecture, the clothing—fashion, culture, style, pistols. These come from books I've collected like old Sears catalogs. I did of course use a poetic license to help the story line. But you have to be careful as a writer. You don't want to stuff the reader with history and facts. Actually, you want a smooth transition into the past, something easy to walk through. A good writer wants to transplant the reader to a different time and place, with different rules, but in a natural way. That's the fun of it, the learning, the research—balancing the need of the story without preaching. I do want the reader to think about situations. To reflect about consequences. To have a stake in the outcome of the characters. To ask questions. When does law become evil? When should the law be ignored? Socrates asked those questions. But the story comes first and foremost. The reader must have a reason to turn the page.

Tyler: Among the people who band together against the oppressive rich are prostitutes and nuns, two groups we would not think of as being compatible. Will you tell us why you chose to make them allies in their struggle against oppression?

Michael: As the novel evolved it was a natural progression. The nuns, too, were poor, having at one time to beg on the Galveston streets to help support the orphanage. The city passed an ordinance forbidding the nuns from begging—most likely because it was coined as the “Third Richest City In the Nation” at the time and this may have caused political embarrassment. When Newt Haskins, a good man from the alley, was sentenced to community service at the orphanage, a mingling of the two groups was inevitable. One of the nuns, in my story, Sister Ruby, was also an “ex-working girl,” having gone through an epiphany that changed her life. She understood the alley people. Because of the history of the St. Mary's Orphanage, and the brave legacy the nuns have since left behind, I wanted to say something good about these heroes. To do so, they had to socialize

with the alley people. Nuns are a forgiving type. As Sister Ruby said to Sister Mary in the book, about the alley people, “They too are orphans dearie. All of us are.”

Tyler: What do you think we can learn from 1900 Galveston, this time and place in U.S. history?

Michael: That we will persevere. This is a grave time in our country’s history, but so was World War I and II, the Great Depression; the great Mississippi floods; the Alaska Earthquake, Katrina, but we always pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off. Today, the cynicism is obvious and many of our institutions appear to be fruitless, bankrupt and confused. Greed and corruption has destroyed lives, futures, dreams. We need to stand vigilant against the trespassers of dignity and morality. We can’t be observers; we must participate. “*The Last Paradise*” is our paradise. It is our legacy.

Tyler: Michael, do you have plans to write any more novels? If so, will you tell us what’s next for you?

Michael: I’m currently writing a different kind of ghost story that takes place in New Brunswick, another exotic location. I spent a few weeks there a couple of summers ago and fell in love with the region. I like taking the reader to new places and by doing so, I go there too—a sense of place and time. I’m also writing a novel about a college professor who survives a critical illness and is forced to re-examine his life. One of these will be finished in the fall, and will be out early next year.

Tyler: Thank you for the privilege of getting to interview you today, Michael. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information can be found there about “The Last Paradise”?

Michael: Thanks for the opportunity Tyler. My website is michaelkasenow.com. My bio is listed there and so is a portion of “*The Last Paradise*,” a peek into Chapter 1. A visitor can go to the free gift shop and download a free environmental e-book and a free poetry e-book; a free poster and art and other good stuff. It’s harmless and an easy site to navigate through. A synopsis of the novel is on the home page. It’s a comfortable place to learn about my writings. I can even be emailed from this site.

Tyler: Thank you, Michael, for the interview and sharing “The Last Paradise” with us and telling us how 1900 Galveston parallels with our own time. I wish you much success with your writing career.

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