

Q&A WITH ALEX FINLEY, AUTHOR OF *VICTOR IN THE RUBBLE*

Q: *To get in the spirit of this book, let's start with some questions that mirror the Agency recruitment process. First, have you been in contact with any foreign government officials?*

A: Sadly, no. I always hoped to be invited to one of Silvio Berlusconi's *bunga bunga* parties.

Q: *Do you hear voices in your head?*

A: Sometimes, but usually I hear them in my elbow.

Q: *Do you drink alcohol daily? Weekly? Monthly?*

A: Yes, yes, and yes.

Q: *Do you ever need an eye opener?*

A: Only if I have been binge drinking the night before.

Q: *Describe a time when you lied.*

A: See above. I'm not telling which one.

Q: *Have you ever used illegal drugs?*

A: No, but the Agency did not believe me when I told them this, so kind of a waste.

Q: *Do you ever have violent thoughts?*

A: Now that I am no longer subjected to polygraph exams, no.

Q: *Do you feel paranoid?*

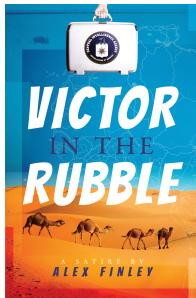
A: Should I?

Q: *Tell us a little about your background—where you went to school, where you worked, where you have lived.*

A: I grew up in Colorado but left after high school, not realizing the state would eventually legalize marijuana. That might have changed my decision. I followed that old adage: Head East, young woman, and off I went to university in New York City. I went to graduate school in Italy, Washington, and New York, before going into journalism in DC. When I found myself part of a wild dog pack chasing then-Speaker Newt Gingrich for a quote about President Clinton's cigar-smoking habits, I thought maybe it was time to move on. Eventually, I landed with the government and lived in West Africa and Europe before returning, against my better judgment, to Washington.

Q: *How and why did you join CIA? Tell us about your experiences at CIA.*

A: I had always been interested in working at CIA. During college, I applied for an internship there but was rejected. (Later, I learned that I probably would have spent my summer pulling staples out of documents that needed to be shredded. Bullet dodged.)



A few years later, I had the opportunity to apply for a position and I took it. On my third day strapped to a polygraph machine, I questioned if that was the right decision, but I moved forward anyway. Despite my many criticisms, I really enjoyed my time working there. Very few jobs exist anymore where you can wake up each day and think: I'm contributing to something that matters. (All those people disrupting the world with apps that tell you to hydrate based on how much you sweat might disagree with me. But really, haven't you guys ever heard of thirst? It's a natural app.) I always enjoyed the topics I worked on and the people I worked with, some of whom are the brightest and most interesting people around. However, due to machinations beyond our control, I saw those same people slowly get crushed by a bureaucratic system that squashed creativity and left really great officers with not one, but both hands tied behind their back. It was frustrating.

Q: *What prompted you to write this novel?*

A: *Victor in the Rubble* started as a catharsis. It was my way of dealing with the trauma that was forced on the Intelligence Community in the wake of 9/11, Iraq, and the 2004 intelligence reform.

One day, I was at the office when something blew up in Yemen (it is a sign of the times that I no longer recall what, exactly, blew up) and a manager in the office I was in approached a case officer at his desk. On a nearby TV screen, we could see the fire in Yemen burning, people carrying out the dead. The manager asked the case officer—at that point a 12-year veteran of the Agency's Counterterrorism Center—why he hadn't yet filled out a survey on Agency employee satisfaction.

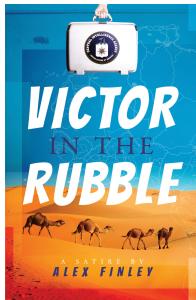
I thought the case officer's head was going to explode. He managed to keep his cool just long enough to say to the manager (loud enough for the entire office to hear), "The terrorists aren't filling out any fucking forms." Then he walked out.

And I thought: What if terrorists *did* have to fill out forms? That would be hilarious.

When I left the Agency, I pulled together the bureaucratic ridiculousness I had experienced myself, combined it with some pretty great anecdotes from friends and colleagues, and decided to transpose that bureaucratic system on the terrorists. Indeed, what if terrorists had to fill out forms and go through the same bureaucratic rigmarole our Intelligence Community must go through? And just like that, I had a novel.

Q: *Where did you get the inspiration for your characters?*

A: The book's protagonist, Victor Caro, is a counterterrorism officer. He is something of a conglomeration, influenced by my own experiences and those of other officers I met along the way, many of whom had their own bureaucratic frustrations to share. I won't say what other characters, if any, in the book are inspired by real people. Any likeness to real people, living or dead, is strictly coincidental or on a need to know basis.



Q: *Are any scenes in your book inspired by actual events and your experiences?*

A: Of course! But I'm certainly not going to elaborate. I think that's part of the fun of a book like this: trying to figure out what's real and what's not. Using satire allowed me to pluck out the absurd parts of real events and use them in a wholly fictional way. I won't confirm or deny any of it. But to keep the Publications Review Board on my side, I will note: this is a work of fiction.

Q: *Victor in the Rubble* is a satire about government bureaucracy. How do you think government should run? Is there any need for bureaucratic procedures and processes?

A: Of course a certain amount of bureaucracy is necessary. We all need checks and balances. My biggest issue was and continues to be the notion that something was a "systemic failure." This allows blame to be placed everywhere and nowhere at once. Good leaders and good managers understand the system is in place to make sure things work, not to stop things from working at all. In the end, the system is made up of individuals who make decisions (even if that decision is not to decide at all).

Additionally, anyone who has read my articles about metrics and bureaucracy at the Agency has seen my gripes about the size of the place. The Intelligence Community grew a lot in the post-9/11 years. Probably some of this was necessary, but a lot of it was numbers: making it look like we have a lot of people doing a lot of things. Nobody wants to be redundant, so people insert themselves into the process. You end up with this idea of "ops by committee," with too many people too far from the operation trying to leave their mark on it. This hampers creativity and efficiency, and in the end hinders operations.

Q: *Is government really as inept and unresponsive as you describe in your novel?*

A: Um, look around you.

But in all seriousness, I think the managers, directors, and others who put this bureaucracy in place are probably well intentioned. But perhaps they don't know enough about how things work down in the weeds, so you suffer the unintended consequences. Righting the Titanic takes a long time, especially when you have so many regulations and bureaucratic processes in place. Imagine if the captain of Titanic, before turning away from the iceberg, first had to fill out a weather report for White Star. I think Director John Brennan is trying to address some of these issues with the new reorganization. But I also think leaders and managers like to leave their mark on an organization by switching things up, rather than breaking things down. And people answer to different agendas. Overall, I'm not hopeful the system itself will improve. However, I have seen many great officers who have stayed on, despite their deep frustrations with the bureaucracy, and who are now moving into management positions. They give me hope that we have good individuals in place to make good decisions, despite this system that people think we have no control over looming over them.