

The Book of Air and Shadows by Michael Gruber

About the Book

A distinguished Shakespearean scholar found tortured to death . . .

A lost manuscript and its secrets buried for centuries . . .

An encrypted map that leads to incalculable wealth . . .

The *Washington Post* called Michael Gruber's previous work "a miracle of intelligent fiction and among the essential novels of recent years." Now comes his most intellectually provocative and compulsively readable novel yet.

Tap-tapping the keys and out come the words on this little screen, and who will read them I hardly know. I could be dead by the time anyone actually gets to read them, as dead as, say, Tolstoy. Or Shakespeare. Does it matter, when you read, if the person who wrote still lives?

These are the words of Jake Mishkin, whose seemingly innocent job as an intellectual property lawyer has put him at the center of a deadly conspiracy and a chase to find a priceless treasure involving William Shakespeare. As he awaits a killer—or killers—unknown, Jake writes an account of the events that led to this deadly endgame, a frantic chase that began when a fire in an antiquarian bookstore revealed the hiding place of letters containing a shocking secret, concealed for four hundred years. In a frantic race from New York to England and Switzerland, Jake finds himself matching wits with a shadowy figure who seems to anticipate his every move. What at first seems like a thrilling puzzle waiting to be deciphered soon turns into a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse, where no one—not family, not friends, not lovers—is to be trusted.

Moving between twenty-first-century America and seventeenth-century England, *The Book of Air and Shadows* is a modern thriller that brilliantly re-creates William Shakespeare's life at the turn of the seventeenth century and combines an

ingenious and intricately layered plot with a devastating portrait of a contemporary man on the brink of self-discovery . . . or self-destruction.

From Publishers Weekly

***Starred Review.* In this ingenious literary thriller from Gruber (*The Witch's Boy*), the lives of two men are changed forever by William Shakespeare and the letters of Richard Bracegirdle, a 16th-century English spy and soldier. Jake Mishkin, a Manhattan intellectual property attorney and a bit of a rake, goes on the run from Russian gangsters. Albert Crosetti, an aspiring filmmaker working for an antiquarian bookstore, finds that life is more exciting than movies—perhaps too exciting. Together, Mishkin and Crosetti travel to England in search of a previously unknown Shakespeare manuscript mentioned by Bracegirdle. Though the pace sometimes slows to allow Mishkin, Crosetti and Bracegirdle to divulge interesting aspects of their personal lives, these digressions only make the story more engaging. The suspense created around the double-crosses and triple-**

crosses works because of the close connection readers forge with Crosetti in particular. The mysterious murder of a Shakespearean scholar, shootouts in the streets of Queens and an unlikely romance all combine to make for a gripping, satisfying read. (Apr.)
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From Bookmarks Magazine

With literary-historical thrillers still piling up on bookstore shelves, Michael Gruber (*Night of the Jaguar*, *1/2 July/Aug 2006) took a risk with *The Book of Air and Shadows*. While the novel will appeal to those who enjoyed *The Da Vinci Code* or *The Rule of Four*, critics agree that its lively dialogue, compellingly flawed characters, sense of humor, and intelligent exploration of religion and cryptology elevate it far above the genre's standard fare. Readers expecting car chases, kidnappings, globe trotting, sex, and murder won't be disappointed, either. A few reviewers stumbled a bit over the excerpts of the Jacobean-style letters, but all agreed that the novel "hits the ground**

running ? until disparate plot threads are brought together in a heart-stopping climax" (*Denver Post*).

About the Author

Michael Gruber was born and raised in New York City, and educated in its public schools. He went to Columbia, earning a BA in English literature. After college he did editorial work at various small magazines in New York, and then went back to school at City College and got the equivalent of a second BA, in biology. After that he went to the University of Miami and got a masters in marine biology. In 1968-69 he was in the U. S. Army as a medic.

In 1973, he received his Ph.D. in marine sciences, for a study of octopus behavior. Then he was a chef at several Miami restaurants; a hippie traveling around in a bus and a roadie for various rock groups. After this he worked for the county manager of Metropolitan Dade County, as an analyst; then as director of planning for the county department of human resources.

He went to Washington DC in 1977, and worked in the Carter White House, Office of Science and Technology Policy. From there he moved to the Environmental Protection Agency as a policy analyst and also as the speechwriter for the Administrator. In 1986, he was promoted to the Senior Executive Service of the U.S., the highest level of the federal civil service.

In 1984 his cousin, Robert Tanenbaum, a successful trial lawyer, called him from his offices in Los Angeles asking him to look at the first hundred pages of a book he had written at the request of the publishing house Franklin Watts (now part of Scholastic). He says "I called him, and I said, 'This is unsalvageable. It's not a novel, it has no characters, no plot, nothing.'"

In return for half the advance, Gruber rewrote the novel, they renegotiated the contract and went into business. This arrangement continued for 15 books. Gruber says he created the characters and the novels based on stories Tanenbaum

told him, or transcripts of cases Tanenbaum had worked on. However, Gruber's credit was limited to a thank you on the acknowledgements page. Eventually the relationship dissolved - *Resolve* (2003) was the last Tanenbaum book Gruber wrote.

In 1988 he left Washington, D.C. and settled in Seattle, where he worked as a speechwriter and environmental expert for the state land commissioner. He has been a full-time freelance writer since 1990, mostly on the Karp novels, but also doing non-fiction magazine pieces on biology.

He started writing *The Witch's Boy* in 1996, but was unable to find a publisher. So he wrote a thriller for adults, *Tropic of Night* (2003), set in Miami, Long Island and West Africa which tells the story of a series of ritualistic murders that sweep Miami. The book has strong supernatural elements, although Gruber points out, "there is no supernatural. It's all part of the universe, although the universe is queerer than we suppose." Two further thrillers starring Miami cop Jimmy Paz

followed: *Valley of Bones* (2005 and *Night of the Jaguar* (2006). In 2005 he also published *The Witch's Boy*. In 2007 he published *The Book of Air and Shadows*, a standalone thriller about a lost Shakespearian manuscript.

He is married, with three grown children and an extremely large dog.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your view of Jake Mishkin's character? Do his personality and profession aid in the search or are they more of a hindrance? Do his flaws make him more likeable?

2. Albert Crosetti's life is currently on hold when he becomes involved in the mystery. He's saving up to go to film school and living with his mother. Does his stasis make him more susceptible to Carolyn's deception?

3. The Bracegirdle letters create an incredible sense of time and place with richly textured language and thoughtful details. Discuss some of the most vivid

images and their importance to the story and to your own experience reading it.

4. What parallels do you see between Jake and Albert? Between Albert and Bracegirdle?

5. How do religious affiliations play an important part in both the past and the modern-day storylines?

6. Comedy and tragedy are both evident in TBOAAS. How do they play off and heighten each other in the narrative?

7. There are numerous correlations between TBOAAS and Shakespeare's The Tempest. How many can you find? Harmony through balance is one of the key themes of The Tempest. Discuss how that theme is relevant to the various characters in TBOAAS.

8. Travel and moving beyond one's normal, everyday experience, both physically and psychologically, occur many times in the story. How do you think that affects each character's development?

9. Throughout recent history, there have been rumors about lost Shakespeare plays. What do you think would happen if a new Shakespeare play were discovered? Would the quality of the writing be as important as the fact that it was by Shakespeare?