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Author Andrew Rowen retells the history of Columbus’ voyage with Native American voice in compelling new novel

“Encounters Unforeseen: 1492 Retold” offers fresh, bicultural perspective written at the 525th anniversary

NEW YORK – With 2017 marking the 525th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ journey to the New World, author Andrew Rowen is releasing a new historical novel, “Encounters Unforeseen: 1492 Retold,” on Nov. 8, 2017 that dramatically recasts the epic voyage that has shaped cultures, religions and ideologies for centuries.

Most literature relating the history of Columbus’ voyage and first encounters with Native Americans focuses principally — whether pro- or anti-Columbus — on Columbus and the European perspective. Rowen’s historical novel now dramatizes these events from a bicultural perspective. It fictionalizes the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of the Native Americans who met Columbus and places their viewpoints alongside those of the explorer himself and other Europeans, all based on a close reading of Columbus’s “Journal,” other primary sources, and modern anthropological studies.

“Encounters Unforeseen” gives insight into the mindsets and backgrounds of key Taíno and European protagonists, including Columbus, Spain’s Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, three historic Taíno chieftains — Caonabó, Guacanagarí, and Guarionex — and a Taíno captive seized by Columbus. Rowen’s portrayals of the Taíno protagonists presents them as neither victims nor statistics, but as personalities and actors comparable to the Europeans. Their side of the story is forcefully told.

Rowen also explores stark social differences between Taínos and Europeans, including their religions, slavery, and notions of private property, and dramatizes the collision of Taíno spirits with Christ and the Virgin Mary. The novel carefully depicts conversations that primary sources indicate occurred, and Rowen weaves fascinating stories around documented incidents. “Encounters Unforeseen” presents a remarkably insightful and fresh look at one of the seminal events that reshaped the course of world history.

Andrew Rowen is a U.C. Berkeley and Harvard Law graduate who practiced law as a partner of a major New York City law firm for almost 30 years prior to retiring to write his first novel, “Encounters

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Unforeseen: 1492 Retold.” He devoted six years to research and traveled to nearly all the Caribbean, European and Atlantic locations where the book’s action takes place, including the archaeological sites where the Taíno chieftains lived in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. He has long been interested in the roots of religious intolerance.

An Interview with Andrew Rowen



The 525th anniversary of Columbus’ historic voyage is this year. Why should people reflect on it today, and what does “Encounters Unforeseen: 1492 Retold” add to our understanding of it?

The voyage and ensuing encounters dramatically altered the course of world history by initiating and influencing the subsequent European settlement of the Americas, which molded the religious, social, and cultural fabric of the New World we live in today. All school children are taught about Columbus and the voyage; a day and countless places — cities, towns, streets, plazas, etc. — are named in his honor; he’s praised by many for being self-taught and self-made, his courage and incredible perseverance through adversity, and his astonishing ability as a mariner; and he’s reviled by Native Americans and many others for the atrocities he committed and the centuries of oppression he initiated. Most of us have thought about the voyage at some time as we try to understand how we as a people became who we are.

As they say, history is told by the conquerors, and most of us have been taught the story of the voyage from the conquering European perspective. “Encounters Unforeseen” attempts to recount what actually happened and how that was understood from both the conquerors’ and the conquered’s perspectives, considering primary sources closely and letting the reader decide among viewpoints.

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Understanding the conquered's viewpoint pushes us to remember the tragedy that continues to haunt Native Americans and to consider our society as an outsider would. More fundamentally, "Encounters Unforeseen" forces us to confront the disturbing possibility that modernity doesn't necessarily involve improvement in all aspects of the human condition, as the civility and tolerance of the society and religion conquered are now often lacking in the modern societies and religions we have inherited.

What kind of research went into writing "Encounters Unforeseen?" Did you discover anything unexpected?

I spent six years researching the history leading to the voyage in primary and secondary sources. My Spanish is rudimentary, but sufficient to labor through texts not translated into English.

I believe that understanding the physical environment where events took place is important to their comprehension, providing clues as to what people might have thought or felt five centuries prior. Standing at the beaches of Bord de Mer de Limonade, Haiti, or on San Salvador's west coast; in the open field at the Corral de los Indios in San Juan de la Maguana, Dominican Republic; atop the western cliffs of Porto Santo, Portugal; or on the quay in the tiny harbor at San Sebastian, Gomera, Canary Islands, has shaped my depiction of those thoughts and feelings.

Although I was familiar with some indigenous societies and polytheistic religions prior to commencing my research, Taíno society and religion and the Taíno protagonists were entirely new to me and a fascinating subject to explore.

But the "surprises" came mostly from learning things about Columbus and the voyage which I never knew or had forgotten. Prior to 1492, he sailed to Greece and Africa — where he would have witnessed slave trading of both European and non-European peoples — and possibly London and Iceland. Isabella and Ferdinand's key advisors who reviewed or promoted the voyage were "conversos," Christians whose ancestors had converted from Judaism — and then the target of the Spanish Inquisition. The Pinta deserted the voyage off Cuba. There were lots of others, many included in the book.

Why did you choose this period of history to focus on in your first book?

There's a lot of historical literature which presents in the same book both European and Native American voices, mostly commencing with the 17th century and with some selections in prior eras. But there aren't many such works focused on Columbus' voyage, so I thought there was a need to write one. More importantly, I've always been interested in the roots of religious intolerance, and the Spanish history of the time period — including the Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and the subjugation and Christianization of the Canary Islands, all

closely prelude to Columbus' voyage — and then the Christianization of the New World commencing with Columbus, drew me to write about it.

How does this book stray from traditional Columbus narratives?

While others may disagree, I believe “Encounters Unforeseen” generally incorporates a traditional academic view of what happened on the European side, following for the most part histories written by Samuel Eliot Morison, Paolo Emilio Taviani, and others. Historians disagree among themselves about what happened, and the primary sources leave much unknown or in doubt even on the European side, and I have had to make choices to decide what to depict. “Encounters Unforeseen” is researched historical fiction, dramatizing events with a specificity that the historical record simply doesn't support — but in a manner I believe consistent with the historical record.

The larger difference between “Encounters Unforeseen” and traditional Columbus narratives is the bicultural approach and the inclusion of a speculative Taíno history. The Taínos had no written history, and the only contemporaneous written accounts of their society are by their conquerors, reflecting the conquerors' knowledge and perspective and sometimes lacking credibility.

The novel's Taíno stories depict both events known to have occurred (e.g., the chieftains' ascensions to power, a prophecy of genocide, the captive's baptism in Spain) and known practices or experiences (e.g., hunting, inter-island canoe travel, a hurricane, a Caribe wife raid, a batey game). The stories are fictionalized based on descriptions of Taíno culture in the writings of contemporary Europeans (such as Peter Martyr d'Anghera, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Ramón Pané, and Columbus himself) and 21st century anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists. Commencing Oct. 12, 1492, the stories are constructed by extrapolating from the conquerors' day-to-day accounts of the encounter (to the extent credible), including Columbus' “Journal,” the biography written by his son Ferdinand, and Las Casas' “Historia de las Indias,” what the Taínos then experienced — fictionalizing the conquered's account to mirror the conquerors'.

Similar to European historians, Taíno anthropologists and other experts also disagree among themselves as to how the Taínos lived, and here, too, I've also had to make choices in what to depict.

Is this a pro- or anti-Columbus book? What is your opinion of Columbus?

As many of us, my boyhood education focused mostly on Columbus' great perseverance and exceptional ability as a navigator and discoverer, not his treatment of Native Americans. I've tried hard to shed this overarching perspective and, through book research, reconstruct him piece by piece by identifying facts or probable facts in the historic record that can be relied upon. As all the protagonists in "Encounters Unforeseen," I've researched his life and writings through his death, and seen that — as most of us — his outlook and temperament changed over his lifetime. Above all, I've tried hard not to care whether particular scenes in the book show him to be good or bad. As with each character, my goal has been to depict validly what he did and thought at various points of his life — be it good or bad — as I determine the record most likely supports.

"Encounters Unforeseen" ends in 1493, largely before Columbus commits the atrocities in his treatment of Native Americans. The book thus depicts many of the admirable qualities many see in Columbus, while at the same time showing his thoughts to embody the concepts underlying the European subjugation of Native Americans over the next centuries.

Do you have plans to write more books?

Yes. I've completed most of the research for sequels dealing with Columbus' subjugation of the Taíno homeland, and the protagonists introduced in "Encounters Unforeseen" will be followed through their deaths. The sequels will explore — from a bicultural view, of course — the horrific story of the slaughter, religious contempt, servitude, and slavery that ensued.

What eventually happened to the Taino people, and are there still traces of their culture in the Caribbean?

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The Taíno people largely suffered genocide other than in isolated areas, but their blood, culture, and spirit has survived through intermarriage. Throughout the Caribbean, there has been a reawakening that many people have varying degrees of Taíno ancestry.

What sparked your interest in religious intolerance?

As a boy, I always found the biblical requirement to worship one true God suspicious, perhaps designed more for a religion's benefit than my own. I think that suspicion matured to an interest in the more general question whether religious doctrine itself is one of the roots of religious intolerance. From a practical perspective, I'm interested in the question whether religious beliefs themselves motivate military or political aims or religious justifications are merely used to support military or political aims — it's hard to open a newspaper these days without asking that. I see both, and both are depicted in "Encounters Unforeseen."

Did you feel drawn to one particular figure in your book?

While I've tried hard not to, the captive, who has a plight barely describable.

If you could be a fly on the wall at any event in your book, which would you choose?

When Guacanagarí hosts Columbus in his bohío on December 28, 1492 (with the captive translating), when perhaps the first friendship between a Native American chieftain and European explorer is formed — a moment soon tragically lost to history. If only things had proceeded differently thereafter.

What will history buffs, teachers, and academics enjoy about this book?

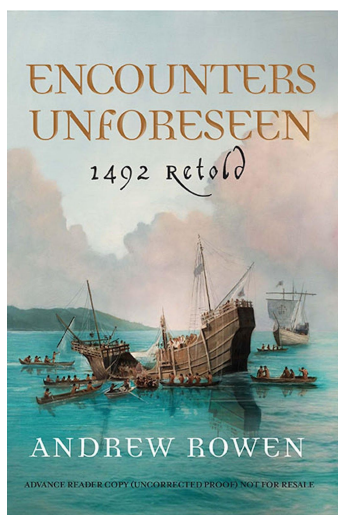
It's a historic novel, closely researched, and they will appreciate that it gives both a rounded explanation of the European and Atlantic world history, as well as reasoned speculation as to the Taíno.

The Isabella and Ferdinand stories include their establishment of the Inquisition, subjugation and Christianization of the Canary Islands, completion of the Reconquista, and expulsion of the Jews from Spain, illustrating European doctrines of conquest, enslavement, and involuntary conversion and how the sovereigns ruled over Old World peoples before encountering Native Americans. The Columbus stories portray his pre-1492 sailing experiences and the evolution of his world outlook. Stark societal differences are illustrated, with the Europeans practicing slavery and the Taínos sharing food as communal property. The narrative carefully dramatizes conversations that Columbus or Bartolomé de Las Casas indicate occurred.

The narrative often incorporates text from primary sources, and a “Sources” section provides citations. It also briefly discusses interpretations of historians, anthropologists, and others contrary to my presentation and issues of academic disagreement.

“Encounters Unforeseen” also reflects some historical information infrequently focused on, such as: the identity of all the Taínos taken to Europe and their known survival and activities; and the Taíno chieftains’ encounters with the Pinta’s crew, which arrives in Haiti/the Dominican Republic prior to Columbus, discussed by witnesses in the Columbian lawsuits. The book’s Atlantic world perspective integrates African themes and events.

Book Details



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Advance Praise

“Amazing! The lives, loves, victories and defeats of the Taíno Indians are just as meticulously and poignantly brought to life as Columbus, his famous voyage and Queen Isabel’s court. A sprawling, globe-trotting, all-consuming tour de force illuminating all sides of the epic cultural clash that created the New World.”

– *Trey Ellis, Platitudes, Home Repairs, Right Here, Right Now*

“The encounter of Columbus and Native Caribbean peoples set in motion events that created the modern world. History books provide brief accounts, but what was the Encounter really like, what did it mean, how was it expressed, in simple, human terms? Andrew Rowen transports us to this moment of creation, and does so by tracing the lives of the main protagonists. This is a fascinating story of enmeshed lives, and the consequences of new worlds. It is written with scrupulous detail to historical accuracy, and, even knowing how it will end, the prose is an imaginative and entertaining portrait of a past we could not otherwise experience.”

– *William F. Keegan, Curator of Caribbean Archaeology, Florida Museum of Natural History, Talking Taíno, Taíno Indian Myth and Practice, The People Who Discovered Columbus, forthcoming Columbus was a Cannibal (and so are we)*