

'Rosewood' Author Will Be In Lake Helen

An Exception Was Made To Invite The Out-of-state Author To The Fair Because His Book's Subject Is "hot."

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LAKE HELEN — For years, no one talked about Rosewood, the small black community on Florida's west coast that was destroyed by racial violence in 1923. All that has changed since nine survivors of the town and their descendants won claims against the state in 1994 and sold the rights to their story to Warner Bros.

A \$40 million movie titled Rosewood is in production under the direction of John Singleton at locations in east Lake County. A book on Rosewood was released by G.P. Putnam's Sons in New York on Feb. 6.

Michael D'Orso's book, Like Judgment Day: The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood, is a Florida story from start to finish.

For that reason, sponsors of the March 2 book fair in Lake Helen invited D'Orso to the show.

The show is limited to Florida authors, but organizer Brenda Hagg said she invited D'Orso because his subject is "hot" in Florida now.

D'Orso, 42, jokes about his Florida connections.

Born in Portsmouth, Va., near the Navy base where his father was a submarine officer, the author said his family moved every two years.

"I lived in Key West a couple of times during my childhood, so I was a Floridian for a while," he said during a telephone interview from his Norfolk home.

A graduate of the College of William and Mary in nearby Williamsburg, D'Orso has been writing features for the Virginian Pilot since 1984 and has won numerous awards for them. He also has been nominated for Pulitzer prizes for exceptional writing.

His first book, Somerset Homecoming, was co-authored with North Carolina slave historian Dorothy Redford. He credits that book's success with his being accepted by Rosewood family members as "the right man to write their story."

"That (first) book, the exploration of black culture and black lives, was very much along the same lines, and when some of the Rosewood people read it, they liked it," he said.

D'Orso began working on the Rosewood story in April 1994, a few days after the Florida Legislature approved the payments to the survivors and descendants.

He made several trips to Florida, meeting with survivors, family members, lawyers, legislators, historians and almost anyone he could find who had some connection to the story. He interviewed more than 100 people and carefully documented everything he learned from them in the book. He finished writing the text in late 1995.

D'Orso said he didn't know much about the movie and hadn't seen the script written by Hollywood screenwriter Gregory Poirier.

"From what I've heard, the film covers just the week of the attack on the town," he said. "In my book, that part is literally just the prologue. And then the story begins."

D'Orso said his book is layered with several stories:

"First, there's the account of the attack. Then there's the story of what happened in the ensuing half century to the people who survived and were scattered . . . their lives and how they were lived.

"Part three is the story of the coming back together of those scattered families, a very involved and painful process for many of them. Then, the behind-the-scenes look at their decision to file the claim against the state, followed by the legislative journey the Rosewood family claim took in Tallahassee.

"Finally, there is the significantly important story of how everything played out after the bill was passed, not just in terms of the families, but of everyone (lawyers, legislators, participants) involved in this."

Initially, D'Orso said, the most important goal in researching the book was to get out and spend time with the survivors.

"These are elderly people nearing the end of their lives and when they die, they take their stories with them . . . stories and memories that form the basis of a very scantily documented experience in American history."

D'Orso is scheduled to sign copies of his book at the Florida Authors Book Fair from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. March 2. Later that day, he is to participate in a discussion about films at the Caffè da Vinci in DeLand, beginning at 7:30 p.m.

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