

Steve Berry's 'The King's Deception' seamlessly blends history and fiction

"Cotton Malone knew a lie would be better, but decided, as part of his new cooperative relationship with his wife, to tell the truth," Steve Berry writes near the beginning of "The King's Deception," the eighth installment in his wildly popular literary series showcasing the former Justice Department operative.

"He knew something she didn't," the author continues. "What does the death of Henry VIII have to do with what happened to you two years ago? she asked him."

What indeed.

"The King's Deception" is a novel that blends the present with the past in an exciting and engaging way.

If you are familiar with Berry's previous Cotton Malone novels, then you know you are in for an exciting ride.

If you are not acquainted with his work, think Dan Brown on steroids. Berry's latest story has everything: kidnapping, assassins, secret societies, high-stakes drama, international intrigue, geopolitical conspiracy and old-fashioned mystery – all taking place on multiple levels that magically transport the reader from current headlines to the archives. The book casts doubt on everything we thought we knew about the underpinnings of contemporary Western civilization.

And to top it all off, Berry is a brilliant writer. Witness the following: "Antrium led Gary from the office out into the warehouse, the space brightly lit by an array of overhead fluorescent fixtures," Berry pens in chapter 25. "Two tables held stacks of old books, some tucked safely inside plastic bags.

Another table supported three iMacs connected to an Internet router and a printer. This was where Farrow Curry had worked, trying to make sense of Robert Cecil's journal, deciphering what seemed impossible to understand."

"But the past twenty-four hours had changed his mind," the author notes. "Not only was it possible, somebody was willing to pay him 5 million pounds just to walk away from whatever

was there."

By the way, "whatever was there" could potentially call into question our understanding of the events that shaped the modern world.

Was Elizabeth I the legitimate heir to the English throne? And what does that have to do with a Libyan terrorist who is about to be released despite his role in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103?

Berry, a graduate of the Walter F. George School of Law at Mercer University, was a trial lawyer for 30 years.

He is member of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries Advisory Board as well as a founding member of International Thriller Writers, a group that includes more than 2,000 authors.

Berry has written 12 books, including seven previous Cotton Malone adventures. Collectively, his books have been translated into 40 languages; he currently has 15 million copies in print in 51 countries.

The paperback edition of his 2012 novel, "The Columbus Affairs," has been near the top of the New York Times best-seller list for several weeks. Berry is considered one of the hardest working authors in America; he is typically on the road more than 40 weeks each year attending book signing events, and conducting "Lessons from a Bestseller" writing workshops for aspiring novelists.

In addition to being a first-rate storyteller, Berry is also an historian who is meticulous with his research.

At the conclusion of the novel, he includes a seven-page "Writer's Note" in which he attempts to separate fact from fiction.

Like many readers, I found myself wondering at several points if the characters he was describing were based on actual historical figures or if they were simply inserted into the plot as a literary device.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Berry goes to some lengths to answer many of the inevitable questions that arise as the plot unfolds: "The death scene of Henry VIII (prologue)

happened, and most of the comments made by Henry are taken from historical accounts," Berry explains. "The king died without his children present, but whether Katherine Parr visited him during his final days is unknown. Of course, Henry's passing on of a great Tudor secret to his last queen was my invention."

"William and Robert Cecil (chapter 16) are historical characters," Berry continues. "William's close relationship with Elizabeth I, including his protection of her during the bloody reign of her sister, Mary, is well documented."

Historians will also appreciate Berry's eye for detail and the realism that permeates almost every page.

Even though I knew I was reading fiction, by the time I finished the book, it felt like I had received a history lesson about a time I had not thought much about prior to picking up a copy of "The King's Deception."

"Elizabeth I was a wonderfully complex person," Berry observes. "She never married and openly shirked her duty to provide a royal heir – both of which raise interesting questions. She was thin, unbeautiful, lonely, with nearly constant energy – totally opposite all of her siblings."

To be honest, I've never been a huge fan of historical fiction. After reading "The King's Deception," however, I may have to rethink my assessment of a genre I used to dismiss almost out-of-hand.

I started the book somewhat skeptical that it would be able to hold my interest; by the time I got to chapter five, I was a true believer.

My sense is that most readers would have the same experience. Berry's latest novel is a page-turner – I recommend it highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.