

# City of Masks

Mike Reeves-McMillan graduated from Auckland University in New Zealand with a Master of Arts in English language and has worked as a book editor, technical writer, corporate trainer and systems analyst. He is currently establishing a practice as a hypnotherapist.

City of Masks is his first published novel.



# City of Masks

Mike Reeves-McMillan



[www.csidemia.com](http://www.csidemia.com)

### **Legal and Technical Notices**

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters, events or situations to real persons, events or situations is coincidental and unintended by the author.

City of Masks is copyright © 1997-2007 Mike Reeves-McMillan.

Cover illustration © 2004-2007 Donia (donia.deviantart.com), used by permission.

First edition. Published 2008 by C-Side Media (csidemedias.com).

Set in Palatino using LyX (lyx.org).

### **For Further Information**

Refer to the City of Masks blog: <http://city-of-masks.blogspot.com>.

ISBN 978-0-473-12213-3

Dedicated to my late father, who taught me to be an  
honest man.



## *Private journal of Darion, Lord Rivers, Undersecretary to the Foreign Minister of Calaria*

### **The sixth of the first month.**

Perhaps I might soon enjoy relations with my wife again.

Sir Willard Chase, that good man, is dead – and I mourn him as is proper. But with his death there comes available a post to which I may appoint Gregorius Bass, so that my honoured spouse may be reconciled to me.

It always astounds me that a woman otherwise astute should so romanticise such a one as Gregorius, half-brother or no. True, he bears a strong physical resemblance to their late father, and has even many of the old man's mannerisms. This circumstance has deceived others, myself included, though never for so long as it has deceived her. Their father was no fool; a badger of a man, black and white, solid and slow-moving, tenacious, fierce when cornered, but no fool.

True, also, that Gregorius is some years older than his sister, and she has often told me stories of how he was her hero and her protector when she was very young, and he not yet away to school. (I sometimes think that if I hear the tale of how he rescued her from the millrace once more, I shall not be responsible for my actions.)

It passes my belief, however, that she thinks him a brilliant prodigy, unfairly held back by his relationship to me; when in fact the exact opposite is the truth.

Many have been our late-night arguments, Katara insisting that he ought to be given a position more suited to his talents; I (having been a diplomat) forbearing to retort that I can hardly demote him, but protesting that I cannot be seen to be nepotistic. She, that surely all know his ability. I, again diplomatic, that no suitable position is available. She, to sulks; and I, alone to a cold bed.

Now, though, with the death of Sir Willard, Bonvidaeo has fallen vacant – a sinecure, made for a plodder, a clod, a filler of forms, a seat-warmer such as Gregorius. Almost a ceremonial post, a hangover from an earlier age, a token to prop the pride of a few Calarian mercenaries and fullers in that now peaceful city who, since the time of my predecessor's predecessor, have not

required the services of an envoy for anything more than permits and official seals – the issuance of which is well within even Gregorius's competence. I believe there is even a book which sets out the procedures, written in a fit of boredom or zeal by some previous incumbent and handed down ever since. He can read, even if slowly, and it is not a long book.

"Envoy" as a title has a good ring. I think Katara may be satisfied with "envoy".

My only concern is that he may offend the odd customs of the Bonvidaeoans, and to that end I asked Tailor, through whose ears all knowledge passes, to search for some native of that city to serve him in the capacity of guide. Gregorius is looking for a new valet (he bored me almost senseless the other night with a long tale about how the present fellow can never heat his shaving water to the right temperature), so I can foist one upon him and not seem a meddler. Indeed, I shall be the solicitous brother-in-law.

Luck was mine again, for Tailor stated immediately that he knew of such a one; a youth, trained to service in one of the great houses of Bonvidaeo, who had sought adventure as a sailor, landed here for a season, and now desired to return to his native country.

(If only I could appoint Tailor to some post fitting to his worth! But were he not a commoner, or were he posted out of kingdom, he could not serve me by the wealth of contacts and the knowledge of the deep currents of the city that he has. I must be content with paying him a clear crown higher than his official post should merit. Had I but more Tailors and fewer Basses. . . )

### **The seventh of the first month.**

The sun shines upon me, though outdoors it is winter and the trees display no leaves. I enjoy, again, the favour of my wife; and find myself much relaxed, and in good temper with the universe.

Today, also, I have met the Bonvidaeoan youth. He is a slender fellow, quick of movement, speech, and thought, and mature for his years, which number perhaps eighteen or twenty. He has the foibles of the Bonvidaeoans: will not look one in the face, and wears the mask all his countrymen affect; yet his tact

would not disgrace a man of my own profession. He is educated, he tells me, in the lore of masks of which that City makes so much, and will be able to serve as clerk and secretary in addition to his valet duties.

He strikes me as the ideal guide for Gregorius. I cannot imagine a youth more suited to keeping a fool out of trouble.

## *Private Journal of Gregorius Bass, Envoy of Calaria to the City-State of Bonvidaeo*

### **The twentieth of the first month**

The sailing from Calaria has been good, the weather fine, the salt breezes refreshing and the motion of the ship pleasant. I am in excellent health and spirits.

This day we sighted the low, wooded headland which, when rounded, brings us within sight of Bonvidaeo. Accordingly, we shall be required to don our masks shortly to comply with the Bonvidaeoan law. Although a low fog hovers around the point and we will probably not be literally visible from the city – and certainly our faces will be not – Corius says that this is not what is important.

Corius, whom His Lordship so thoughtfully provided as my valet – after I mentioned in passing that I was dissatisfied with the last man – Corius has been telling me at length of the origin of the Bonvidaeoan customs, and as it is a droll story I shall record it here.

Some three hundred years gone, it seems, Emilion, first of that name, was king in Bonvidaeo. This Emilion was much addicted to the fantasies and foibles which occurred during the season of Carnival, which then was, as in all the countries around, a matter of a week. This decadent obsession, along with the bibbing of much wine, inclined the monarch – whose power at that time was absolute – to extend the period, first by another week; then, when that week was almost ended, by a month; and then, when that month was almost passed – making six weeks in all – did he declare, and have passed into the city-state's ordinances, that Carnival would run year-long.

His high ministers threw their full support behind this novel law. Corius would have it that they looked for His Majesty's distraction with the entertainments of the Carnival, not for a week, but perpetually, to allow power to descend to their own shoulders; but Corius is something of a cynic. The merchants, who made their best money during Carnival, were also disinclined to oppose its extension, though in fact their annual income rose but little – for it was the special nature of the time, and not the festivities alone, which encouraged free spending.

From the religious arm, there was at first opposition, for Carnival fosters that wildness which in Tolland they call "maskfreedom". Revelers, their identities concealed, play their tricks and japes with impunity, and license prevails, against the teachings of religion. But it happened (perhaps by coincidence, though Corius hinted not) that the then Archpriest died shortly after the edict, and his successor convened a Council of theological reasoners and logic-choppers to study the matter. After being closeted for almost two months, they emerged with the basis of a new doctrine which has prevailed, except for certain heretics, since that day.

Worship in Bonvidaeo, and indeed surrounding nations, has always involved the use of masks to depict the presence of the gods among men; and Carnival, too, involved the secular use of masks to represent famous characters, mythological and historical.

What the assembled theologians birthed, influenced (says Corius) by certain cunning factions among the King's ministers, was the doctrine of Characterism, which was always (they claimed) inherent in their belief and practice. This doctrine holds that *the mask is the thing*. That is to say, a priest in the mask of the god is the god, standing among his worshippers, a legitimate focus of awe and adoration. Likewise – and here is where the ministers benefited – a man in a mask of a mythical hero is that hero.

Thus the ministers, small men in truth, could glorify themselves by adopting the masks of famous wise men, statesmen and saviours of their nations; and the Bonvidaeoan religion now required the orthodox *to treat these men as those men*.

Heaven be thanked, we have no such custom or belief. But the Bonvidaeoans, who have maintained and sophisticated this

doctrine over time, make it the basis of their very society, and so I must go masked to move among them or be guilty at once of a sin and a crime.

Though the other aspects of Carnival are no longer practiced in Bonvidaeo to any greater degree than in other nations, this masking continues in all places even theoretically within sight of the City, as I have alluded to already. Corius, good servant that he is, has prepared for me several masks – for the making of masks is a skill prized by Bonvidaeoans, and he has made a special study thereof with an elderly savant of his acquaintance.

When I am in my official capacity, I must mask as an Envoy, while at other times Corius thinks it safest, until I learn the customs, that I be Uncast. This means a simple black robe and domino, and so long as I do nothing to draw attention to myself nor do not seem to be in any character, I am effectively invisible, protected from harassment by any passer-by. (For some of the masks are malign, and some have complex traditions attached to them; and if I gave the wrong response to one such while in a character, I would be denounced as Unmasked and vilified at once as a criminal, a blasphemer and a transgressor of etiquette. For religion, law and social mores all agree in Bonvidaeo – at least touching the matter of masks, though perhaps less so on other matters.)

When we reach the city, Corius says, he will take me to consult his former mentor, the elderly and respected Felkior, who keeps the Book of Masks. This important ceremonial post is given to one wise in history, myth and the lore of the mask, and on his advice many trials, civil and ecclesiastical, are settled. For it is he who records, and recalls, the meaning, form, and legends of the various masks, and how the characters depicted by them should act, and who is licensed to wear which; so Corius hopes that this sage (of whom he speaks as fondly as of a father) will be able to find for me some inoffensive persona in which I can safely move about in Bonvidaeoan society.

Far from feeling threatened by the risk, my blood is thrilled. It is an adventure that My Lord has given me; and I feel at once like a discoverer of strange lands, and like a maiden at – as it were – her first masked ball.

We are about to round the headland, and I must mask.