

INFINITY RING

Q&A with Matthew J. Kirby, author of INFINITY RING BOOK 5: CAVE OF WONDERS



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Matthew J. Kirby is the critically acclaimed author of the middle-grade novels *Icefall*, which won the Edgar Award for Best Juvenile Mystery, *The Clockwork Three*, and *The Lost Kingdom*. He was born in Utah and grew up in Maryland, California, and Hawaii.

1. With *Infinity Ring*, you had pretty much all of history as your playground. How did you decide to focus on Baghdad's golden age?

Having worked in the schools as a psychologist for several years, it occurred to me that kids today have a very different image of Baghdad than I had growing up. The golden age was the period that gave us the tales of the Arabian Nights. It was a time and place of tremendous achievement on multiple fronts. Many people don't realize the classical texts that gave birth to the Renaissance came to Europe by way of Arabic translations. So I picked this period in history partly to explore a city that has always fascinated me, but also to bring a different Baghdad to life than we hear about on the news.

2. How much research did you have to do as you worked on *Cave of Wonders*? Did you already know a lot about the setting before you started writing?

I had to do quite a bit of research, actually. I had a pretty basic understanding of the period, so I needed a lot more. Fortunately, I love research, so that was a lot of fun to do.

3. Did anything you learned in your research particularly surprise you?

One of the surprising and even frustrating things was how little of the Baghdad of that period remains. The construction techniques and materials just haven't held up through the centuries, and almost nothing is left of the city I wrote about. I had to rely on old accounts and descriptions to locate places and try to bring them to life.

4. Did working with a team of authors provide any new and unique challenges? Any benefits that you don't experience as the single writer of a series?

I loved every moment of that process. There were challenges, of course, as I tried to pick up the characters from where the previous authors had left them. But I had phone calls and discussions with them, particularly Matt de la Peña, who wrote *Curse of the Ancients*, the book just prior to mine, and that helped a lot. I think we all put the story first, and just tried to make it feel as cohesive as we could. The benefit, I think, was that we each brought something different to the table, which made the story richer and greater than the sum of its parts.

5. Looking ahead, what do you think will be the biggest challenges for the other writers of the *Infinity Ring* series?

Going forward, I can't wait to see how Jennifer Nielsen and James Dashner finish up the story. I don't want to give away spoilers, but when I leave Dak, Sera, and Riq, they're in kind of a desperate situation. Riq, in particular, isn't sure how things are going to go for him. They haven't stopped the Cataclysm from happening, and they still don't know for certain if they can. I'm just super excited to see how that all plays out.

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6. What was your first impression on reading the first book, *A Mutiny in Time* by James Dashner? Did you know immediately in what direction you'd take any of the characters?

I knew I wanted to delve deeper into Dak's character. I've always loved history, so that shared interest drew me to his character in a pretty big way. I wanted to see what made him tick. Where did that passion come from for him? And what did it mean to him that they were *changing* the history he had studied? So that was something I knew from the beginning I wanted to explore.

7. Aspiring writers are often told to write what they know. Since your story infuses adventure, history, and science fiction elements, how have you followed that advice?

Well, to be honest, I've never followed that advice. If I had, I never would have written about an orphaned street musician in *The Clockwork Three*, a Viking princess in *Icefall*, or a young botanist in Colonial America in *The Lost Kingdom*. Part of why I write is my own curiosity. I *want* to get outside myself, to learn about and maybe even experience a different time and place. My advice is not to write what you know, but to write about what interests you, challenges you, and maybe even frightens you.

8. Can you describe your writing process? Do you have any quirky writing rituals? What advice can you give to aspiring writers?

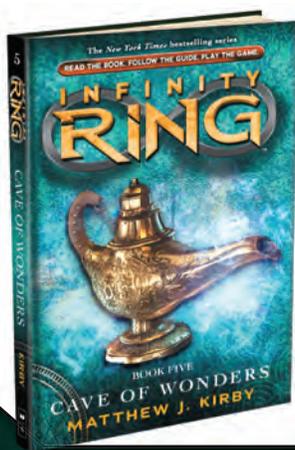
I don't have a particular routine or ritual. I often listen to music that evokes the mood or setting I'm trying to get on the page. I usually have something to drink by my side, most often Diet Mountain Dew. I try not to keep munchies by the computer, but I'll go get something when I want it. I've also found I can write most anywhere if I have my noise cancelling headphones. Home, a coffee shop, even outside at a park. My advice to writers is to do what works. If it gets in the way of you putting words down on the page, then try something else. But every writer is different, and once you've found a routine that gets the book written, stick with it.

9. The importance of scholarship—of books and learning and libraries—is a deeply rooted part of *Cave of Wonders*. Did you always see this particular theme at the core of your novel? How early in the process did you know you would be writing not just a historical novel, but a novel about the importance of history?

I think that was there from the beginning. I have loved history for as long as I can remember, and when I was approached to write one of the Infinity Ring books, the historical aspect of the story was a huge draw. I knew I'd be able to get at the question of why history is important, why we need to study it. I've also loved libraries for a long, long time. Back when I was in college, I spent hours just wandering the stacks, pulling down any book that caught my eye. I got a lot of story ideas that way, and learned a lot of things I never would have known. The idea of libraries being destroyed, as happened in Baghdad and other places throughout history, like Alexandria, still breaks my heart.

10. Do you believe there are underlying themes or universal truths in the Infinity Ring series? Or is it difficult to say when each book is written by a different author?

I don't want to speak for the intentions of the other authors, but one thing I've noticed is that we've all taken up the idea that we are our history. History isn't just a list of names and dates. It's a *process* that creates the present. Our present is a product of our past. If we want to better understand ourselves, we should look to the events that brought us here, and be mindful about the future we are creating right now. I think it's important to ask ourselves, "What will be written about us?"



Europe is in the grip of the Dark Ages, but there is a light in the dark: Baghdad. The great city has become a center of learning, populated by scholars, merchants, and explorers from all across the known world. But danger lurks in the desert . . . and Dak, Sera, and Riq must act fast to save the world's greatest library from utter destruction.

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By Matthew J. Kirby

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