

New Fiction from Mike Freedman: KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI



The only thing to fear is missing out. Sources indicate all opportunities to pre-order a first-edition of *King of the Mississippi* will be lost forever by July 9, 2019. Click the image to avoid missing out.

The shine and swagger of a new day.

Great Recession? Not Houston. And yet, and yet there had been a speed bump in September 2008, sure, but that had been assessed and corrected; and now the city of Brock Wharton

seceded further from
the rest of the flatlined country in the first week of
September 2014. As
Wharton was considering whether to rearrange his weekend
schedule to pencil in
sex with his wife, one of the strangest men he had ever laid
eyes on breached
the space of his open doorway. Of average height, the boyish,
sun-cooked man
appeared taller than he was as his askew brown hair lashed out
in every
direction. His rangy build (accentuated by the too-small, off-
the-rack, navy
double-breasted suit he wore as if he were a redneck admiral
at a regatta that
Wharton would never enter) seemed pulled at the sinews' seams.
It was the sort
of flawed build that none of the South Texas ranching families
would ever
breed. If not for the intensity of the blue eyes—divided by a
comic eagle nose
that dived toward raggedly chapped lips—so nakedly sizing him
up in return,
Wharton would have dismissed the figure as an apparition too
absurd to be real.

Unnerved by the fixed eyes that looked through him
to some burning skyscraper or falling zeppelin outside the
window, Wharton
twisted around anticipating to be hit by a tornado. But the
downtown skyline
was undisturbed. Annoyed by this intrusion and humiliated that
he had been
tricked into a search beyond his window, Wharton spun around
in his chair to
regain the initiative. "Who—"

“You’re the man to beat?” A smile the size of the intruder’s face tore through the puffy lips and exposed a series of swollen red gums congregated around two monstrous white tusks for front teeth, which, if not fake, the hospital-white fangs had avoided the yellow staining of the other teeth and clearly swam in their own current in the man’s mouth. A muddy five o’clock shadow surrounded the giant mouth, which surely, upon closer inspection of this dark facial sandpaper, would be attributed to not shaving than some celebrated regeneration of stubble.

His piney, log-cutting aftershave sprayed Wharton’s office with his scent. A hand slithered in the air above his desk toward Wharton. He stood and asked in a harsh tone that betrayed the mask of imperturbability he wished to project, “Who are you and what is the nature of your business in my office?”

“I’m Mike Fink,” the man said in a mysterious dialect, a dialect hailing from a region that Wharton could only place as from the land of the lower class while his limp hand was grabbed by Fink. His flagrant confidence-man grin expressed an expectation that Wharton knew the name, if not the reputation. “I’m here for the leadership position.”

I, Wharton declared to himself, will personally see to it that that never happens. This was a case that needed no analysis. Wharton pulled his hand from Fink’s clasp and came around from his desk. “Be that as it

may, I have never heard of you. I am sure we can resolve this misunderstanding in no time if you would please . . .” But Wharton trailed off, watching in horror as Fink plopped down unasked in the chair across from Wharton’s desk and wriggled his lanky body to find an incorrect posture. This creature’s cheekiness apparently knew no bounds. Wharton found himself slightly behind Fink and facing his back; Fink tapped his right foot, waiting on the start of an interview.

Wharton was not about to give such an entitled lout. *Leadership* position? Papers rustled behind where Wharton stood, but he could not take his eyes off the hunched back of Fink.

“I see that you used your Special Forces navigational skills to find Brock’s office, Mike,” a squeaky voice said behind Wharton.

“Too easy, Carissa. Didn’t even have to *consult* the compass.”

“Consult,” Carissa repeated in a higher pitch that no doubt carried a waving of a finger at clever schoolboy Fink for his introduction of an unimaginative punning attempt to their colloquial exchange.

“A good consultant never consults a compass.”



Click on the image to order the “Catch-22 for the millennial generation.”

“Miss Barnett, what is going on?” Wharton asked, as

he swung around to see the top-heavy recruiter giggling and swaying her head to the savage's tapping beat. Was she blushing? Her lips certainly now bore the mark of lipstick, adorned in a Valentine's Day red to match a pair of six-inch stiletto heels that had magically sprouted up from her earlier flats like weeds in a trailer park. She was without her jacket, and it appeared that—was it possible, even amid the other illusions?—she had lost three or four buttons, too, judging by the excessively gratuitous amount of breast on exhibit. All at once, Wharton felt the butt of a joke, a weary traveler who had stumbled into some rustic country inn for shelter only to be mocked by the randy bar maiden and the regular patrons.

"Oh, Brock, I'm so sorry. I guess you hadn't been notified that Mike would be interviewing this afternoon. He was traveling from New Orleans and wasn't able to make it for the morning block of interviews."

She ruffled through the stack of papers in her hand and pulled a badly mauled page out and passed it to Wharton. "Here's a copy of his résumé. Like I told Mike, you are the only one left to interview him before the meeting in the conference room in half an hour to decide on who the new hires are."

Wharton waved her on before she disclosed any more details of the hiring process. Oblivious to the intent of his wave, she leaned

over to Wharton with the bright eyes of a much younger child, a mercurial silver sparkle that screamed antidepressants, and whispered audibly for Fink to hear, "He's a Green Beret."



"I don't care if he's the pope, Carissa, as I have only a half hour to give an intensive interview," Wharton said truthfully, for despite his conservative Christian upbringing, he now cared little for religious figures. Indeed, besides possibly salvation, little reward stemmed from religious fervor beyond the required Christian affiliation among his strategic-friends crowd. Wharton thought even less of people in the military, despite the nauseating resurgence of post-9/11 glorification of a segment who'd been the frequent subject of derision prior to that day. In Wharton's youth, the military was the last stop for the talentless who could not do anything else in life. It usually wasn't even much of a choice: *You can go to prison, or be all you can be in the Army.* Now everyone was expected to shake their hands, pick up their checks in restaurants, turn over their first-class seats on airplanes, and worst yet, stand up and clap for them at sporting events while nodding that the only reason the sport is even being played is because of heroes like them fighting in some country with cities no one can pronounce. An inane

rah-rah

yellow-ribbon patriotism, a shared ritual offering peace between the jingoes, Middle America, and pinkos where everyone emerged feeling good about their participation. Doubtless this explained how this Fink character was granted a CCG interview.

“Well,” Wharton said to Fink, shutting the door on Carissa, “it appears I am to interview you. I’m going to take a minute to scan through your résumé.”

“Take your time,” the applicant advised the interviewer. “There’s a lot there.”

There, Wharton quickly realized, was not a lot there: current employment listed as *none*, no work experience (unless ten years in the military counted), a 2.9 GPA, and a bachelor of arts in English literature (was that not the easy major?) from Tulane University (a bottom first-tier university that CCG did not even review applications from) the same year Wharton graduated. Lo and behold, Fink’s résumé was actually a mirror out of a fable, in that if you held it up, your exact opposite looked back at you.

“An English literature major?” Wharton murmured, bringing the CV closer to his eyes.

“With a minor in theater. I read somewhere that English majors make the best consultants. Stands to reason.”

Had recruiting seriously thought the special forces
bullet in bold letters at the top alone merited an interview?
Special Forces
could not be that special if Fink lacked the cognition to
apprehend that he did
not belong at CCG. That his presence, an interloper
squandering his time, was
offensive to a Brock Wharton, who had conducted a life
cultivating a résumé.
Fink was a great example of a candidate not having researched
CCG; how had he
passed the first-round interview? In fact, Wharton assessed it
to be the most
heinous résumé ever submitted for his review: not even the
oversized font or
alignment from section to section was consistent in what
amounted to only a
stretched half page of largely questionable achievements (high
school senior
class president?). Wharton looked up at Fink in time to see
him fondling his
Texans football!

“Put that down!” Wharton pointed at the ball holder
on the wall next to Fink, who on his orders positioned the
ball upside down on
its seam.

“I apologize. I had forgotten that you were drafted
in the last round after playing for UT.”

Wharton searched the blue eyes sunk back in the
triangular face for an intended slight in the usage of “last”
to describe the
still-prestigious seventh round. What it seemed Fink hadn’t
forgotten was the
chatter of sports columnists, recruiters, superfans, and
boosters who had once

ranked Wharton the top high school quarterback in the South and proclaimed him the next UT football savior. He in turn ranked this same mindless mob number one in cowardice after four years of enduring their catcalls every time he was injured and being denounced by them for betrayal when their impossible expectations for their fair-haired boy were not met on the field. "Were you drafted as well after graduating college?"

"Drafted by our country," Fink said, startling Wharton with a belly laugh loud enough to be heard down the hall.

Wharton avoided Fink's face to conceal the anger he was sure must be reddening his own cheeks. He found refuge in Fink's résumé. A review of it demonstrated that the undereducated Fink knew absolutely nothing beyond the art of exploiting some tax credit for businesses that interviewed veterans. Another bending of the laws, no less egregious than allowing veterans a pass in public with their PTSD service dogs while their pit bulls created anxiety for everyone else. Wharton pushed aside the flash of resentment that made him want to physically kick Fink from his office. He settled on an approach he was convinced would inflict far more damage to this impertinent CCG impostor's candidacy: cede the stage to an unwitting Fink and allow the veteran to shoot himself, hailing as he did from a demographic statistically known for its high

suicide rates.

“Thank you for your service. Now why don’t you walk me through your academic accomplishments?” Wharton began anew, chumming the waters of that pesky foe of Delusion: Fact. “I see here that you had a two-point-nine grade point average at Tulane.”

“Two point nine four five to be exact, but if you round that up it is a two point nine five, and if you’re really telling a tale, you could round that to a three point zero.”

“CCG, almost as a rule, requires its applicants to have a GPA of three point six or above from a top-ranked college. You are applying for the position of consultant with an undergraduate GPA of two point nine against a field of applicants that all have MBAs, and, in some cases, two advanced graduate degrees. Have you done any graduate-level course work at all?”

“The Special Forces Qualification Course.”

Fink was making this easy for Wharton. “I don’t think I follow,” Wharton said, baiting him to continue his charm offensive and rambling lack of reflection, which conformed ideally to Wharton’s plan of wrestling back control of the interview. “Can you elaborate specifically on how this course qualifies as graduate school and how it relates to a career in consulting?”

Fink straightened up in his chair. His arrowhead

chip of a face leaned in over the desk. Was he applying for a job or auditioning for a small part in a play?

"De Oppresso Liber," Fink said, enunciating each Latin word for Wharton's appreciation.

Wharton stared dramatically at the now confirmed lunatic and awaited a further terse three-or-four-word inadequate explanation that was not forthcoming. It was not as if Wharton lacked experience playing a part; he knew full well what was expected of him in life's starring role. Finally, Wharton asked, "Excuse me?"

"Motto of the Green Berets." Fink thumped his chest with his fist (in the spot where the handkerchief, which could have been the only item to make his costume more ridiculous to Wharton, was missing). "It means 'To Liberate the Oppressed.' "

"What does this have to do with consulting?"

"For a decade I trained not only on how to operationally liberate the oppressed, but also how to free my mind from the oppression of conventional thinking. A consultant referencing unconventional thinking in a plush CCG office and actually being unconventional when the stakes are high are as different as a yellowbelly catfish is from a bullhead catfish," Fink exclaimed. He had also managed to concurrently use his hands to grotesquely elucidate the contrasting courage of each subspecies by forming

what Wharton interpreted as human female and male genitalia. "Like consulting, it's about being adaptable. Who is the most adaptable? Ain't that America? Now, I'm not a big war story guy, but you asked me to describe a situation where I had to lead a group of people and convince them that an unconventional solution was the right way and to that I say: how about every day in Iraq! If that—"

"Two alphas battle to be top dog at a global consultancy in this amusing satire on business, ambition, and entitlement... A solid entertainment from a writer of considerable talent and promise."

– Kirkus, Starred Review

"I didn't ask you anything of the sort. You are barking up the wrong tree."

"I once stared the bark off a tree I was so riled up," Fink offered as further qualification. He laughed and winked at Wharton.

"Too much time overseas in the sandbox dodging death this past decade will do that to you. The relevance of my graduate work in the Special Forces Qualification Course is that I have unique professional training and a record of success in solving and analyzing complex problems. As I explained to the senior partners, and this perhaps fails to come across in a limited reading of a CV, there is a value in being able to establish networks of influence—"

“Influence,” Wharton repeated. “You are claiming to have acquired this from the military?” Here was a hick who could not influence the next banjo number at a hoedown—could Wharton get a witness among the kinfolk (because they’re all related) messing around on the hay bales?—and yet Fink thought himself up to CCG snuff. The true tragedy of these small-town military applicants not being that bright was that they were unaware of it. Seeing how everyone else was afraid of the possibility of veterans returning to the office and shooting up the place, Wharton saw it as his duty not to coddle military candidates, but rather to use the interview as a teaching moment to direct them to their intellectual rung below dieticians. He did not doubt that they probably thought his posture that of a cheese dick. But comporting yourself as such was part of the game, be it assimilation of the fittest douches. In Wharton’s CCG class, there had been an ex-Naval Academy nuclear submariner who had lasted a year out of the Houston office with his conventional mind-set, his pervasive logical staleness onsite incapable of turning the client ship around. He’d even had a gut.

“May I please just be allowed an opportunity—” But a knock at the door cut Fink off before Wharton could cut him off again.

Nathan Ellison, a senior partner in his midforties with the body and energy of a younger man able to both network

around town at
all the right social gatherings and find time to teach Sunday
school, stepped
inside. "Didn't realize you were still doing an interview." He
apologized to
Wharton, then noticing Fink, asked, "Is Brock giving you a
real pressure
cooker?"

"Can't complain, no one's shooting at me," Fink
said, bounding up from the chair to straighten his corkscrew
backbone into an
erect figure of authority for a handshake, with a nod to
Wharton. "Yet." Their
hands met and held, arm wrestling blue veins popping out in
the kind of
kingmaker handshake set aside for finalizing backroom palace
coup plots. They
smiled at each other and continued to ignore Wharton as if he
were a naked man
changing in *their* locker room row. "Only jesting. He's great,
Nate."

Wharton brooded over the liberty taken with Nathan's name,
paraded as it was by
Fink, who no longer sniffed the air but deeply inhaled the
noxious fumes that
he had introduced to the office.

It dismayed Wharton that the late-afternoon autumn
light from his window slightly softened the crags of Fink's
bird-of-prey
profile, the challenging mannerisms and hillbilly hostility of
the hawk-nosed
dive bomber jettisoned for the litheness of the assassin, high
on hash and his
mission, who moves limberly along the corridor wall in wait on
the balls of his

feet. “Unlike our intellectual discussion, Brock and I were sparring about the value in establishing networks of influence onsite with clients. I suppose we represent differing schools of thought”—Fink motioned with his hands to group him and Nathan on one side against Wharton on the other—“regarding the best method of how to mine pertinent data to achieve effective results. Just waiting on him to give me the case, but if you two are in a rush to get to your meeting, I am happy to skip over the bio part.”

“Can’t talk about it,” Nathan said, and turning to Wharton added, “or he’d have to kill us.” Was the newly christened infantile persona Nate, once a sober CCG senior partner by the honest Christian name of Nathan, as high as Fink?

“Influence.” Fink flicked his wrist in the air to snap an imaginary towel at Nathan, who laughed and closed the door. Fink’s reciprocal laughter, forced to begin with, stopped the moment the door shut.

Wharton hypothesized that Fink’s true intellectual capacity could be brought to the surface quite easily with the right application. Deployed not to the Middle East but to the far more unsympathetic region of high finance, how would Fink operate in the world of big money?

“Let’s play with some numbers. We have to know that you are comfortable with numbers and speak the language of the business world

while coming up with unconventional solutions to complex problems, as I recall you endeavoring to frame it earlier. The best way for us to discern whether you have the skill set required for the intellectually rigorous environment of consulting is by walking you through a case and seeing how . . . you . . . compete.”

“Mike Freedman writes with a distinct sensibility. His new novel King of the Mississippi throbs with humor and American exuberance.”

—Ha Jin, National Book Award winning author of Waiting and The Banished Immortal

“I like to win . . . in . . . life.”

Win? Was Fink attempting to commandeer *winning*, the very ethos Wharton lived by? Wharton handed him four clean sheets of paper and a clipboard with a pen attached. “How many in-flight meals were prepared on an average day last year for flights from George Bush Intercontinental Airport?”

“Forty thousand.”

“Come again?”

“Forty thousand.”

Wharton could not have been felled harder had Fink launched his entire gangly frame at his knees. *In point of fact*, Wharton would have normally explained if Fink had not rendered him speechless, the correct answer to the market-sizing question was forty-three thousand

after factoring
in the four thousand meals for the international flights.
Wharton attempted to
salvage some dignity from this unfathomable opening checkmate
that had always
stumped even the smartest business school students by an
incorrect margin of
at least ten thousand. "Would you care to illustrate how you
arrived at that
number?"

"For the reason that around forty thousand is the
right answer," Fink charitably clarified.

"I am interested not in Hail Mary guesstimates but
your thought process. That you were on the runway for ten
minutes and watched
two other planes touch down that you then multiplied by six to
calculate how
many per hour. You then extrapolated out that there were three
runways total
and each plane on average carried one hundred forty-five
passengers. Which you
multiplied by twenty instead of twenty-four, as the time from
midnight to four
in the morning is essentially a dead zone for departures. And
that, of those
domestic flights, only twenty-five percent of them provided a
meal service."

"Which is how I arrived at around forty thousand
meals. Just do the math like you just did. I solved it like I
had one shot, one
kill. Some of us applicants have been vetted—and I don't mean
at an investment
banking desk job playing with myself and numbers."

Fink released a cackle of a laugh aimed to pierce

what patience Wharton had left. The Prohibition gangster-suited Brer Rabbit across from him had duped Wharton into illustrating a method aloud that backed Fink's wild-ass guess, now claiming ownership of Wharton's mathematical reasoning. What next: squatter's rights to Wharton's office? After Fink's barrage of assaults on football, his manhood, and the nonvetted like himself who had played with themselves while investment banking, Wharton suspected that his colleague Piazza was behind all of this. The explicit attack on investment banking by Fink was an overplaying of the inside information he had been fed, revealing the puppet strings. It was time to cut them, as Fink was still an applicant applying for a job at Wharton's firm. Why hadn't he stuck with the Dr Pepper case, a straightforward branding case? Fink could not even articulate his own identity.

"You will need to write down your calculations and structure an outline for the remaining part of the interview. And I will be collecting your notes when we finish for confidentiality purposes."

"I understand. You're talking to a holder of a Top Secret security clearance."

It occurred to Wharton that such a fact, if true, did not bode well for national security. Wharton got up and walked to the window. "For the sake of simplicity, let us use the number forty thousand meals a day." He faced Fink and began the mad

minute of firing.

“Our client, a company called Swanberry Foods, is responsible for fifteen

percent of the daily in-flight meals at George Bush Intercontinental Airport

with a profit margin of one dollar per meal—but the meals only stay edible for

eight hours. Recently, management at Swanberry Foods has been considering an

overhaul, moving to frozen meals that stay edible up to twenty-four hours,

enabling our client to increase its profit margin twenty-five percent per meal.

The technology and new equipment to switch to the frozen meals costs fifteen

million dollars over five years.” Fink’s pen lay untouched atop the paper.

“What would you advise our client to do under the circumstances? You may take a

minute to structure your—”

“I’d pull the trigger and double down on this new technology if our client’s only objective is to maximize profit over the long run. You’ve got to roll the dice to make money.”



Clicking on the image above jumps to the Amazon page for KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

“Please demonstrate beyond the usage of military and gambling metaphors how our client should strategically

approach this decision. This time, be so kind as to walk me through your

calculations that support your hypothesis after taking a moment.”

Fink held up his index finger

to Wharton and began to scribble manically. The same index

finger reappeared
two more times separated by three-minute intervals between
flashes. It took
all the reserve in Wharton not to snatch the finger on its
third appearance and
break it.

“What do your numbers say?”
Wharton asked, putting an end to the longest ten-minute
silence of his life.

“Profits of almost six million
dollars a year if Swanberry switches to the proposed plan.
That’s before I
shave their fixed costs to trim them down.”

“I think you mean variable
costs,” Wharton said, allowing a laugh to escape at such
amateur histrionics.

He leaned over to try and read the chicken scratch on the top
piece of paper.

He was enjoying this and shook his head slowly at the
illegible writing,
indubitably representative of the mind that had dictated it.

“God only knows
where, but I’m afraid you have an extra zero or two in there
somewhere. I don’t

know where to begin helping you because I can’t make out a
single number on

your paper. This is why a *successful* applicant will use this
as a dialogue

and voice aloud each major step in his or her explanation;
that way we can help

guide you a little should you stumble in one of your
calculations. Had you done

the math correctly, you would see that at their projected rate
of sales

Swanberry would lose almost a quarter of a million dollars a

year over the next five years, and that it would take almost six years just to break even after the investment if they could withstand the initial losses.”

“I was shooting for long term, the big picture.”

Like the trajectory of a clay pigeon, Wharton had anticipated this rationalization before he fired. “If you were thinking ‘long term’ and the ‘big picture,’ you would have noted they needed to increase their market share by marketing to airlines that their newly designed meals would last longer and save the airlines money compared to the other products being offered by competitors. Even acquire a competitor and streamline costs. And that’s only after analyzing whether the industry is growing. You would have recommended that they diversify with other products or at least expand their current market into supermarkets, hospitals, retirement centers, prisons, and even your military base chow halls. And that is exactly what we did, because I worked on this for eleven months—though the real company was not called Swanberry.”

“Not bad, though, for ten minutes versus what took you a year, right?”

Wharton did not bite on this tease designed to distract him from closing in for the scalp. “Where’s your outline or structured strategy? I need to collect your scratch paper as well.”

Fink first handed Wharton a sheet from the bottom, the outline. "There might be a gem or two buried in there y'all could use," he thought he heard Fink say as Wharton gazed transfixed on the only two things written on the paper: $\text{profits} = \text{revenue} - \text{costs}$, and circled below it, always look at the revenue.

" 'Always look at the revenue.' I don't even know what this means," Wharton muttered in shock, letting the outline float down to his desk. "This is your foundation?"

"Winning," Fink instructed, standing up and tapping with the familiar index finger on the written equation at the top of the outline. "Or in the more narrow terms of this particular world, maximizing profits. In a wildcatting oil town like Houston, a thin line—"

"I must conclude this interview, for I have to attend our office meeting," Wharton said, rising from his chair and sparing himself from Fink's clichéd interpretation of the essence of Wharton's hometown.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

Fink held up his hands as if about to make a confession. "I've got nothing for you."

Wharton thought it was the first valid point Fink had made.

Excerpted from *King of the Mississippi*, Copyright © 2019 by Mike Freedman. To be published by Hogarth, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, on July 9. Excerpt published on *Wrath-Bearing Tree* with permission.