

A Conversation with Lance Charnes about The Collection

After publishing two thrillers [Doha 12 and South], why a mystery?

I started writing fiction with mysteries, then discovered I could do thrillers people like. *The Collection* is going back to my roots. Second, I had some characters and a concept I wanted to play with for a while, and they didn't lend themselves to the thriller structure. Third, I was reworking a novel I wrote some time ago and the original thrillerish parts were the ones that didn't work well.

So this isn't the original version?

I started writing the original – called *Fake* back then – in December 2007 after my wife and I traveled to Florence and Milan. It was set in Florence and ended up being an awkward mix of caper and Mob thriller. It didn't get much interest from agents when I shopped it around. I eventually shelved it to work on *Adrift*, which took me deep into Tami Hoag territory and never really worked out.

I started casting around for a new project after I finished *South* and happened to re-read *Fake*. There were some things that seemed to work, so I figured I'd just update it and fix the rough bits. Unfortunately, I couldn't get it going using the original characters. After a lot of false starts, I eventually chucked the original characters and plot and brought in a whole new cast and story and, eventually, a new title. The art-fraud angle and a couple names survive from the original, but everything else is new.

Art theft and shady dealings in art form the core of the story. You also tweet about what you call "art crime." What is it that interests you about this very niche aspect of crime?

The more I read about it, the more interested I became in the fundamental weirdness of the art market. Billions of dollars flow through it every year, but it's perhaps the least-regulated, most opaque commodity market on Earth. When I learned that stolen art makes up the third largest illicit trade in the world – after drugs and guns, but ahead of sex – I knew there's a story in there somewhere. It helps that a series of very engaging true-crime books involving art have come out in the past ten years, which made entry into the topic that much easier.

The plot centers on the search for a cache of stolen art being used to finance Mafia operations in Milan. How true to life is this device?

Organized crime has been using art to launder and move money for years. We hear about only the high-profile thefts of mega-expensive paintings from museums, but thousands of artworks are stolen every year from private homes or businesses. A fairly large number of these end up in the criminal economy. Some wealthy newcomers to the art market (especially from the Persian Gulf and China) aren't very fussy about provenance or clear title. Add all this up and I wouldn't

be at all surprised to learn some drug cartel or Mob clan has built up an inventory of stolen artworks it can use to finance its daily operations.

Your main character, Matt Friedrich, is a convicted felon and fluent liar. Your previous main characters have been fairly upstanding citizens, even if they have complicated pasts. Why the change?

One of the things that didn't work in the original *Fake* was Ryan, the main character. I built him as kind of a naïf who gets sucked into this multi-layer scam and has to let his false identity teach him how to get through. He had to get very clued up very fast, and it didn't make sense.

This time around, I did what I've done more recently with my novels: figured out what skills my characters will need and why they're involved in the main action. It turned out the lead character needed to be a crook with experience dealing with the seamier side of art sales. The rest of his background followed pretty quickly.

Why is he an architect rather than an art expert?

I didn't want him to be a total insider. He stumbled into the gallery world looking for a job, not a career, and learned about a very twisted aspect of this weird world. He approaches art as an educated layperson might – he knows what he likes and doesn't much care for the changing fashions of the MFA crowd. I hoped this would make it easier for readers to identify with him. Also, I wanted Matt to have had a “real job” in the “real world” and lost it in the 2008 crash, the same thing that happened to his parents. This way, the money troubles that drove him into crime can't be dismissed as entirely his own fault.

For a cheat and liar, he often seems pretty concerned with doing the right thing.

Matt's not a sociopath. He has a grudge against the very wealthy – he blames them for causing the economic crash that wiped out his parents and saw quite enough of their bad behavior at the Los Angeles gallery he worked in. He doesn't have any problem taking away what he sees as their excess money. He calls it a “tax on silly rich people.” At the same time, he doesn't want to hurt “normal” people, especially ones having a hard time of it. This is why, for instance, he feels so bad about scamming Gianna, the Italian gallery assistant who helps him in his project.

Matt also seems very comfortable with his feminine side. He knows art and fashion, and lives platonically with a female roommate. Can't he play football or something?

Let's make something clear: Matt's straight. He was married, had a one-night stand with Allyson [*Note: his employer*], and perpetually lusts for Gianna. His roommate Chloe is a lesbian, but also his best remaining friend from his pre-prison days. His boss at the gallery made Matt read fashion magazines so he could recognize the clothes and be able to tell how much the clients were worth. It's become second-nature now. That said, Matt was influenced more by his mother

than his father while he was growing up. His dad's ham-handed attempts to "make a man out of him" just pissed off Matt. He couldn't care less about football.

Carson – Matt's partner and minder – isn't the typical female main character in a mystery or thriller. Where did she come from?

Carson's a composite of women I've known in the military, law enforcement, and other heavily male-dominated career fields. It's hard being a woman surrounded by all that macho. Sexual harassment is still a major problem. I've noticed two common adaptive behaviors among women in these circumstances. One is to become Super Woman: perfect hair and makeup, perfect home, perfect children, leading the Lean In group at work, mentoring other women, so no guy will dare hit on her. The other way out is to become one of the guys: downplay her femininity as much as possible and work out, swear, drink, shoot, and fight just like (or better than) the men around her so it won't occur to them to hit on her. Carson chose Door #2 while she was with the Toronto Police Service and she hasn't changed, even though she's not in that environment anymore.

She's also not physically attractive, which is highly unusual for a lead female character.

Carson's not a model, but she's not ugly. I like to think of her as being plain-to-average. She wears makeup only when she has to and out of habit keeps her hair nearly as short as a man's. There are lots of Carsons out there, but we don't see them on TV or in the movies.

She's also a big, fit, healthy woman. Female readers have told me to leave out her statistics, but for the record, she's 5'-9", 150 pounds (mostly muscle), and wears a size-10 dress. If you need to know what that looks like, find pictures of Gina Carano, a former MMA fighter. When she was fighting, she was an inch shorter and five pounds lighter than Carson, but you'll see she's in no way, shape or form overweight. Carson keeps herself covered up – another leftover from trying not to show any skin to her fellow cops – so it's hard to see what shape she's in. Matt's blown away the first time she shows up in a party dress. Carson will never be a Playboy centerfold, but she could make it into *ESPN Magazine's* Body Issue.

Why is she Canadian?

I wanted to give Matt and Carson as few common touchpoints as possible. It fits her backstory in a more original way. Also, it gives her a platform to snipe at his Americanness. Finally, the original female lead for *Fake* was Canadian, and I think I kept it out of inertia.

In addition to having a female partner, Matt's new boss is a woman. Where did Allyson come from?

In most of the mystery and thriller novels I've read, the hero's boss (if he has one) is a guy, and the hero relates to him as either team captain, surrogate father or an obstruction. Allyson is in many ways Matt's dream woman: striking, sophisticated, strong, prosperous, and (apparently) a

tiger in bed. Unlike most men, he actually got to have his dream woman for one night. Now he has to work for her, he can't touch her, and he can't tell anyone about their fling. Can you imagine how hard that would be? I wanted to add that to Matt's already full plate of problems.

Both your thrillers featured very distinct, human antagonists. In The Collection, the villain's identity is unclear up to the end, and we're left with several to choose from. Why the change?

Well, this is supposed to be a mystery. One of the biggest differences between a mystery and a thriller is that in a mystery we don't know whodunit, while in a thriller we know who's doing it but don't know if the hero will survive long enough to figure it out or stop it.

A more specific answer is that everyone here is at least a little shady – especially Our Hero – and the whole milieu they're in contributes to the crime. There's no restoring of order to chaos here, just rearranging the chaos.

The Collection is a departure for you not only because of its genre, but also its style: Matt tells the story to us as it happens. Why did you do this here and not in your thrillers?

It's really hard to tell a thriller effectively in first-person. You have to be able to switch points-of-view so the reader knows what all the players are up to. Some authors cheat and tell the hero's story in first-person and use third-person elsewhere, which makes me nuts.

I've tried first-person before and was never able to pull it off. It was fun trying to think like Matt. I was able to get Matt's voice after some experimenting. Telling the story in past tense telegraphs that the narrator survived the experience (unless it's *The Lovely Bones*), while present tense leaves open the possibility that the narrator won't make it through to the end. I think first-person present makes the narrative sound fresher and more immediate.

The plot isn't as complex as those of your thrillers. Is that because of the genre?

Partly, and partly because it's told in first-person present, which really pulls in the focus. There aren't as many moving parts, no big action set-pieces to set up, and everything happens in two cities. I also didn't start out by outlining the entire plot, as I usually do; I thought I'd see what would happen if I let things unwind organically. What it did was drive me crazy. I ended up building an outline, which caused some rewriting. Never again.

You said that you visited Milan and Florence before you wrote the original Fake. Have you gone back since? Did you visit all the places mentioned in the new version?

We visited all the major locations in the city center. I still have a photo of the gravesite in the Cimitero Monumentale where Matt and Burim meet. Some of the seedier settings – the

warehouses and vacant lots and so on – I put together out of Google StreetView, Flickr, and whatever else I could find. We haven't gone back.

The party scene at Expo 2015 was challenging because when I started the rewrite, the Expo site was a vacant lot and Palazzo Italia [*Note: the Italian pavilion*] was still being designed. I had to put together as many renderings and video flythroughs as I could find. Once the Expo opened in May [2015], I started having actual photos and videos to work with. Surprisingly enough, I didn't have to change much.

Why Milan? Why didn't you keep the story in Florence?

Florence is a backwater as far as Mafia activity is concerned. That was another problem the original version had. Several of the major organized crime groups are active in Milan, and there's a lot of money sloshing around in that city to support an art scene.

Without giving away too much, the ending suggests a possible sequel. Do you intend for this to be a series?

I did set it up as a series. I know a lot more about Matt, Carson, Allyson, and even Chloe than what shows up in *The Collection*. There are all kinds of art- and design-related scams I can use in future plots. We've seen only a couple of Matt's acquaintances from his previous life, and his old boss is still out there dodging extradition. Of course, a series makes no sense if no one reads the first installment, so we'll see.

If it's a series, is there a romance in Matt's and Carson's future?

Slow down. They have to learn to not want to kill each other first.

What will your next novel be, a thriller or a mystery?

No idea. I need to catch up with my reading and let *The Collection* settle for a while. If it does well, I may start a sequel; if not, I may go back to another thriller.