

## ***A Conversation with Lance Charnes about Chasing Clay***

***This story throws a lot of changes at Matt, your series protagonist. The biggest may be that this is the first plot that doesn't involve paintings. Why ceramics?***

For one thing, I wanted to change the subject. There are more kinds of art than paintings, and many ancient ceramics can be truly beautiful – think Golden Age Greece. Secondly, I wanted Matt to be completely out of his comfort zone for this story. He doesn't know anything about ceramics, ancient or otherwise. Third, I became fascinated by the mid-2000s Ban Chiang scandal, partly because of its scale and partly because it started just down the street from me. The *Chasing Clay* plot is liberally cribbed from that debacle.

### ***What was Ban Chiang?***

Ban Chiang is a Neolithic culture in northeast Thailand that UNESCO calls “the most important prehistoric settlement so far discovered in South-East Asia.” Among other things, the culture made some remarkably pretty pottery.

Starting in the 1980s, a group of people in Southern California started importing industrial quantities of Ban Chiang pottery (over 10,000 pieces in all) that had been looted from the site, then sold the wares to collectors and museums. One of the movers behind the scheme was the chief curator of the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana. Two of the other participants ran an Asian art gallery on La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles; they offered a side service giving collectors inflated written appraisals so that when the collectors donated their pots to museums, they could get outsized tax deductions. Eventually the feds caught on and busted the lot of them in 2008, including a number of museums that had accepted donations with juiced valuations.

I wrote [an article about the subject for Criminal Element](#) in 2017.

***This all tracks closely with the scheme Matt investigates.***

Most everything that Jim Bandineau or Lorena Montford [*Note: two of the main antagonists*] does has a direct parallel to what happened in the Ban Chiang scandal. They each map to one of the real-life perpetrators. The characters even refer to Ban Chiang and how they're supposedly trying to learn from those mistakes.

***Is that why the third act of the novel takes place in Southeast Asia? The series hasn't visited Asia before.***

I could have put the source almost anyplace in the world. Cultural heritage looting and antiquities smuggling are unfortunately global phenomena. But just as Matt knows nothing about ceramics, he's also never been to Asia and doesn't speak any Asian languages. This helps keep

him way out of his element. It also makes him dependent on someone who *does* have that background but may have another agenda.

***Enter Savannah Kendicott, the art advisor. Does she have a real-life parallel in the Ban Chiang scandal?***

No. I needed someone who could steer Matt through this particular art-world niche but also potentially lead him astray. Also, art advisors haven't shown up in the series' first two books but they're increasingly common in the world of higher-end collecting. And Matt needed a wild card to play with.

***One of the other changes is that Carson, Matt's partner in the first two books, isn't in this one. Is Savannah supposed to be a substitute for her?***

Carson *is* in this one, just not physically. They have some phone conversations, but she has her own project going on. Matt comes to realize how much he'd relied on Carson in his previous projects and how much he misses her now. This will have some impact down the road.

Savannah is very, *very* different from Carson. She's almost the anti-Carson. Their backgrounds couldn't be more diametrically opposed. But they're both survivors – they just survive in very different ways.

***She has a much more developed fashion sense, for one thing. She also uses sex rather than force to control Hoskins, Matt's alter ego.***

Let's just say she uses all her resources to get what she wants.

***Matt and Savannah have a lot of sex, or at least that's implied. We never see any of it. What do you have against sex scenes, anyway?***

I think most sex scenes in books are incredibly boring. They read like assembly manuals for flat-pack furniture (“Insert Tab A into Slot B...”). They also usually stop the action cold. I've done only one, in *South* [*Note: a standalone thriller*]; it lasted for one short paragraph and was all about what the participants were feeling rather than who was touching what. That's enough.

Keep in mind that Matt and Julie [*Note: the supporting female lead in Stealing Ghosts*] slept together for weeks during that story. We assume they did what most healthy, consenting adults would do when sharing a bed, but there wasn't any reason to go into it. Matt and Savannah don't actually spend a lot of time together, so when they *are* in the same city, they make the most of it. The impression that they're always bonking may also be because Savannah's very comfortable being nude, so it's more apparent what they're up to.

***This is the first DeWitt story that takes place partly in California. Why do that now?***

Matt's dealt in all three books with the consequences of his time at the gallery. He ran across an old nemesis in *The Collection*; in *Stealing Ghosts*, he was atoning for what he did to Holocaust survivor Ida Rothenberg. Here he has to avoid people he hurt who are still alive. Also, with all the research I had to do for the last third of the book, I needed to make things easier on myself for the rest.

***Why San Francisco? Why not keep everything in L.A.?***

I liked the separation it provided and I didn't want the story to be all about Matt hiding from ex-clients. A little of that goes a long way. Having Matt and Savannah in different cities also kept me from having to give Savannah something to do all the time. San Francisco is a great-looking, thoroughly messed-up city that I know pretty well, both now and also from the old days when I was a kid growing up in the Bay Area. I had the luxury of visiting San Francisco before I wrote most of *Chasing Clay* and was able to put in fresh details.

***Are all the California locations real, as they are in the other series books?***

Yes. Hoskins' house is based heavily on a real house in Bel Air. I've eaten in all the restaurants mentioned except for the Tadich Grill, which has been around forever. The Tonga Room is, if anything, more surreal than it appears in the book. Achara is in a real building even though the gallery itself doesn't exist; the gallery's space is what was a vacant storefront when I visited. Bourbon & Branch is a real speakeasy. Bandineau's storage facility really exists under a different name. I unfortunately haven't stayed in either of the hotels – I don't sell enough books yet to afford that.

Before you ask, both the hotels in Thailand and the two cafés I mention really exist. I had to take some liberties in Myanmar because it's just not that well documented.

***It's been two years since Stealing Ghosts released. Why so long?***

I started what was supposed to be Book 3 early in 2018 with a goal of publishing by November of that year. By midyear, I had to admit that it was the wrong story for Matt. Then I had to find the *right* story for him, which took time to outline and research. I was also getting too ambitious and ended up having to cut a lot of stuff.

***You've mentioned the research twice. Did you know anything about Southeast Asian ceramics before you started this?***

I came to it cold like Matt does. I had to read some fairly dense specialist textbooks and a whole slew of specialist websites just to learn enough to fake it and to create a semi-plausible story for

the Nam Ton wares. I also visited the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco to see Thai and Burmese ceramics in person.

***Nam Ton wares aren't real?***

No. They could be; the lineage Savannah proposes for them early on could have happened. I constructed them out of bits and pieces of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Chinese wares. Like Nam Ton, the best Song-era ceramics look like they could've been made yesterday.

***Were the Asian locations new to you too?***

I've been to Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Australia, but never Southeast Asia. Like Matt, much of what I knew about it was from reading books or watching movies about the Vietnam War.

One thing I discovered quickly is that while Google Maps and StreetView are great for the developed world, they disappear fast when you hit the Third World. Once I got to Myanmar, I had to search travel blogs and stock photos to see what things look like. The things that Matt does to find Nam Ton on maps are things I really did. As he discovers, the bulk of photos and geographic information about east-central Myanmar is about narcotics and the ethnic wars.

***What's next for Matt and the DeWitt Agency? Will Carson return? Will Savannah?***

Matt's taking a vacation. I need to do something else after writing three of these back-to-back.

People seem to like Carson, so she'll star in her own story next. She'll get the plot that was wrong for Matt since her problem-solving methods are more appropriate for it. There's a reference to it in *Chasing Clay* during one of the phone conversations between Matt and Carson. It'll be more action/adventure than crime/caper.

The Carson book will probably be a brand extension for the DeWitt universe. I'd planned something like this from the beginning knowing I'd get tired of doing the same thing repeatedly.

You never know what Savannah may do. That's one of her charms.