

## ***A Conversation with Lance Charnes about South***

### ***What inspired this book?***

The crash of 2007 and the rise of the Tea Party in general, and the 2012 Presidential election in particular. There seemed to be a concerted effort on the part of one of our two major political parties to turn the clock back to a pre-New Deal, pre-Progressive Era America. That's been slowly happening over the past thirty years anyway, but now it's threatening to speed up. I paid attention to what the political right was saying and then started to think it through. What would the country be like if they had their way? That's where the world of *South* came from.

### ***Do you consider South to be a political novel, or a dystopian novel?***

Both. Dystopias are political by nature. The way an author's imaginary society breaks down depends entirely on his or her political and economic assumptions.

There are two major types of literary dystopias: the fascist nanny state (like the *Hunger Games* world), which is the conservative's nightmare, and Mad Max-ish anarchy (like Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*), which is the liberal's nightmare. I don't think either is all that likely to happen here. I *do* think something like *South's* world could very easily happen, since in a lot of ways, it's coming true right now.

### ***How do you describe South's world?***

The New Gilded Age. I didn't even have to make that up; Google it and you'll get over four million hits. Of course, the first Gilded Age – the period between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – was gilded only for the top 8-10% of Americans; the rest lived like serfs.

### ***A striking thing about South's world is how familiar it is, even though it's set in 2032. Is that deliberate?***

Partly. The future comes slowly to the poor, and the Ojedas – our hero Luis and his family – are poor. Because it's only twenty years from now, there aren't any flying cars, jumpsuits, space travel, laser weapons and all that. It also seems familiar because it already exists in what we used to call the Third World.

### ***So in South, America has become a Third-World nation?***

In most ways, yes. More specifically, it's become the America of 1890 with drones and the Internet. Ironically enough, this was also the China of 2005.

### **China?**

Think about it: no effective regulation, behemoth corporations that are beyond the law, poverty-level wages for the bulk of the working class, a tiny, highly privileged ruling class, and a ravaged environment. That was America in 1890, and it also describes China in the first decade of this century.

***The central conceit – that over 400,000 American Muslims are in prison camps – seems extreme. How could that be done? And how could they be held for so long without protest?***

It's based on the Japanese-American experience during World War Two. There were 129,000 people of Japanese ancestry – most of them natural-born American citizens – in the mainland U.S. in 1940. Over 120,000 of them ended up in concentration camps less than two years later. They were held for over three years with essentially no protest from the white population. A majority of white Americans *supported* the program, and the Supreme Court upheld it. The U.S. of 1942 had far fewer resources and far less infrastructure than the America of 2020.

Another example for scale is the British “villagisation” program during the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s. *Over a million* Kikuyu were rounded up in “protected villages,” essentially small towns surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers. This was in a poor country with very little developed infrastructure.

Depending on whose numbers you use, there will be 4-6 million Muslims in America by 2020. Using the low end of that range, 10% of the nation's Muslim population is in camps in *South*. Think about the thousands of acts of anti-Muslim violence following 9/11 and the anti-Muslim hysteria still going on. How many people do you think would've protested if 200,000 Muslims [*Note: 10% of the 2001 population*] got sent to prison camps following 9/11? Who would've listened? Fear is an incredibly powerful stimulant for racism and a huge conscience suppressant.

***What was the biggest challenge you faced in creating this world?***

Staying ahead of the present day. I'd put something in a scene thinking, “Yeah, this might be around in twenty years,” and three weeks later I'd find out that thing was already on the market or that event had already happened.

An example: I figured I'd have to make up some Supreme Court ruling or new law to explain why the politicians who created this new world never got voted out of office. Then *Shelby County v. Holder* came along this July [2013]. It struck down the part of the Voting Rights Act that kept Southern states from passing laws to keep non-whites from voting. Sure enough, Southern states started passing exclusionary voter ID laws *the next day*. I couldn't have made that up. Nobody would've believed that Jim Crow could come back so fast, but there it is.

***How much did you have to make up, and how much is grounded in current events?***

Virtually none of it is made up from scratch. Nearly everything about the world has happened at some point in American history, or is happening now. The surveillance technology and methods pretty much all exist today. U.S. airspace will be open to drones by September 2015. The “slate” is just a more powerful version of the tablet computer. My most far-out invention is probably the printer-sized DNA analyzer that can sequence a genome in five minutes. We’ll probably see that sometime in the next ten years.

***Are you afraid that readers will be put off by the politics that underlie South?***

If they make it past the back-cover copy and the online preview, then no. They’ll know what they’re in for after the first couple chapters. The only ones I worry about are the people who read on the back cover about Muslims in concentration camps and think the novel’s about a utopia. They’ll be disappointed.

***Nora’s not at all the stereotypical Muslim woman. She was in the Army and is an FBI agent. She wears hats instead of headscarves. Why didn’t you make her more “typically Muslim”?***

Just like there’s no such thing as a “typical American Catholic,” you get into trouble when you try to define a “normal” American Muslim. There’s too much variation. Also, a woman who’s devout enough to look like the “stereotypical Muslim woman” would never join the Army or FBI, so she wouldn’t draw this level of official interest. Still, Nora dresses modestly, covers her head, and defers to her husband.

I wanted her parents to be from a more tolerant and cosmopolitan branch of the Sunni sect, so I put their roots in Beirut. They could’ve also been Turkish or Indonesian, but that’s more exotic than I wanted her to be. Nora tells Luis that the other members of her mosque never thought her parents were “good Muslims.” She’s aware of her struggles to be a “good Muslim,” but knows there’s a limit to how “good” she can ever be.

***She’s not very likeable starting out.***

She’s about what you’d expect a woman in her position to be like. She’s a cop dealing with someone she considers a criminal. She’s going to be wary and distrustful, and she’d resent having to do what she’s doing. As we get to know her, and as she gets to know Luis, she dials it down.

***Both Luis’ friend Ray and Ray’s girlfriend Salma wear Indian-style clothes, and you make several references to other aspects of Indian culture being commonplace. What makes you think India will become a fixture in American popular culture by 2032?***

The short answer is that Indian culture is already gaining a toehold in America today through Bollywood, at least on the coasts. Indian movies now play on American multiplex screens in areas with large South Asian populations. We're seeing more South Asian characters on TV, and NBC's *Smash* did a Bollywood-takeoff number in its first season. Would that have happened even three years ago?

The somewhat longer answer is, dominant economies dominate culture. It happened with Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, with Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and with America in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. China will have the dominant economy by 2032, but unless there's a lot of political reform before then, it probably won't spawn the kind of creativity that can succeed outside its own borders. As India becomes richer, though, it's going to generate a huge creative class that'll have a global impact. And I think *chaat* is going to be the next great fast-food discovery.

***Speaking of Ray...the cartel he works for feels more like a malevolent corporation than a criminal mafia. It's not like the more usual depictions of drug cartels.***

The Mexican drug cartels we see today were all put together by guys who worked their way up from the bottom – they were dealers or growers or enforcers. They usually don't have a lot of formal education, just savvy, and they've had to make it up as they go along. But these guys are getting old, and their children have gone to college in the U.S. or Europe and have come home with MBAs and know how to run global logistics operations, which is what the cartels are now.

The way things look to me – and I may be off-base on this, and if so, I'm sure someone will let me know – the situation in Mexico can go one of two ways. One way is that the Mexican government beheads the cartels' leadership, and the cartels splinter into dozens or hundreds of street-gangs-on-steroids. This'll make the former cartels just a tough law-enforcement problem instead of the existential threat they are now. The other possibility is that the cartels will continue to consolidate, morph into multinational corporations with political parties attached, and finally take full control of large parts of Mexico – kind of like Hezbollah has in Lebanon. I can't see the present half-assed situation continuing for years into the future.

***Luis is an unusual thriller hero not only because he's Latino, but because he's in a happy marriage to a strong woman, Mirabel. Why not go the brooding, solitary antihero route with him as so many other authors have done?***

Because it's been done so much, for one. Secondly, Bel gives him something else to lose when his various adversaries close in. He also needs Bel to put him back together again when he gets hurt.

Don't forget that Luis also has a son in the Marines, both parents not only still alive but also living with him, and a brother and sister in other parts of the U.S. There's a whole Ojeda family. I'm trying to think of another lead character in the action/intrigue genre who has an intact, multigenerational family. I'm drawing a blank.

***Luis also has – had – a daughter, Christa, who died when she was seventeen. Why did you include her?***

One of the things that ties Luis to Nora is Nora's young daughter Hope, who reminds Luis of Christa. It gives him a personal connection to Nora's family that he might not have developed otherwise.

Christa's other reason for being is the story around her death. It dramatizes the consequences of the restrictions on women's reproductive healthcare that the rightists are putting into place now.

***Where did McGinley come from?***

McGinley shows what's been lost from the world we live in today and what still hangs on. On one hand, he's a brutal semi-racist who has a habit of killing prisoners. On the other hand, he's mostly honest – a rarity among cops in *South's* world – and he's willing to follow the evidence wherever it takes him.

***What other novels do you think compare closely to South?***

That's a hard question. *South* crosses genre lines. It's set in the near future, so it's speculative fiction, but it doesn't fit on the sci-fi shelf. It's got a political undertone, but it's not set in Washington D.C. It's sort of a spy story, but without actual spies. Right now, I'd say it's one part Walter Moseley's *Futureland*, one part Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and one part Len Deighton's *Berlin Game*, with a dash of T. Jefferson Parker's Charlie Hood series thrown in.

***Having spent so much effort on building South's world, do you foresee a sequel or series?***

Luis and Bel are done with adventure. I can see using the world again with unrelated characters and a new story, the way William Gibson did with the *Sprawl*. We'll see.