

## **A Conversation with Lance Charnes about Stealing Ghosts**

### **Why did you pick Nazi-looted art to focus on this time?**

Various reasons. For one, restitution is still a big problem – somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 artworks plundered by the Nazis before and during World War Two are still missing. Some of them may be among the million or so pieces grabbed by the Soviet Army at the end of the war. Second, the scenario (grandchildren of Holocaust victims trying to recover their grandparents' art) is still quite common. Finally, it was the other half of *Fake*, the novel that spawned *The Collection* and this book.

### **So this isn't the first time you've written about this subject.**

I wrote *Fake* in 2007. It was an awkward mix of caper and Mob thriller and it didn't work very well. The plot revolved around a portrait looted by the Nazis before World War Two that may or may not have ended up in the hands of the Russian Mafia. *The Collection* is about the stolen-paintings-and-the-Mob part of *Fake's* plot; *Stealing Ghosts* is about recovering the portrait.

### **The setup sounds a lot like Woman in Gold, the 2015 film about a woman trying to recover her aunt's portrait from the Austrian government. Aren't you concerned that people will think Stealing Ghosts is just the same wine in a different bottle?**

The only thing they have in common is a portrait and a relative. Maria Altmann's story is actually not all that unusual; what made it special was (a) her aunt's portrait was a Gustav Klimt masterpiece, (b) she had a lawyer willing to take her case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and (c) she got a book and movie out of it. Most people in her situation don't have the advantages of (a) and (b). A more common experience is that the survivors or relatives finally get a claim together, and the relevant authority turns it down. That's what kicks off *Stealing Ghosts*.

### **Let's talk about Dorotea DeVillardi, the portrait. You gave it an extensive backstory. Is it real? If not, where did you get the idea for it?**

Dorotea's portrait isn't real. Its story is based on aspects of how John Singer Sargent, the portrait's artist, got and carried out his work, and on how Viennese Jews lost their possessions after Nazi Germany took over Austria in 1938. I wanted her portrait to be a Sargent because I really enjoy his work, something I share with Matt [*Note: the main protagonist*]. Dorotea herself had to be a beautiful brunette because that's what Matt likes, and it was important for him to bond with the painting. There was much more of her backstory in *Fake*.

**Which is...?**

Short version: the Meckelsohns and the DeVillardis were rich Jewish families tied by business and friendship after World War One, the former in Vienna, the latter in Venice. Herschel Meckelsohn and Dorotea DeVillardis grew up knowing each other, fell in love, married, and settled in Vienna. Dorotea's mother was a patron of the arts and knew Sargent from his regular stays in Venice. The DeVillardis commissioned Sargent to paint a portrait of Dorotea when she turned eighteen; the portrait went with her to Vienna, where the Nazis confiscated it in 1938.

***Dorotea's portrait is as much of a character as the humans in the story. Matt talks to it, and it seems to talk back. Why did you do that?***

I needed Matt to bond with the portrait so he'll be extra motivated to "rescue" her. Beyond that, I want the reader to care about her like she's a person rather than a piece of art. If she's just a thing, it doesn't seem like such a big deal that the wrong rich guy owns her. If she's a person, then she's been kidnapped, and who wouldn't want her to go back to her own family?

***Dorotea's family is represented by her two grandchildren: Ron Bowen, a pharmaceutical CEO whom we never see, and Julie Arnlund, Bowen's cousin. Let's start with Bowen. Why did you make Matt's client so unsympathetic? Big Pharma executives rank with tax auditors and politicians as the least-favorite people in America.***

One of the family members had to be rich enough to be able to afford the DeWitt Agency's [Note: Matt's employer] services. He also has to be enough of a jerk to propose stealing the portrait from a museum, and enough of a control freak to foist his cousin off on Matt as, essentially, a spy. Bowen was never going to be cuddly, so why not make him someone both Matt and the readers can despise? Matt might have a reason to change up the job to screw Bowen, or something. Besides, this way Julie looks much more sympathetic in comparison.

***Julie's a fifty-year-old schoolteacher, which in the crime genre is as unlikely a romantic interest as they come. Where did Julie come from? Why did you go this way with her?***

One thing to keep in mind about Matt is that "normal" is exotic to him. In every job he had after he got out of architecture school, he was surrounded by people on the make. His boss at the L.A. gallery was a criminal who's now on the lam in Indonesia. Matt spent a stretch in Federal prison with white-collar criminals. Now he works at a Santa Monica Starbucks where he serves coffee to some of the most genetically-blessed women on the planet, none of whom notice he exists. "Normal" hasn't been part of his world for a long time.

I wanted Julie to be as outwardly normal as possible. She's significantly older than Matt, but Matt has kind of a thing for older women. She's bright, nice, and cleans up nicely. Having given Matt a younger glamorpuss to lust after in *The Collection*, I needed to go completely the other way this time. It's only after Matt gets to know Julie better that he starts noticing she may not be as normal as she presents.

***Which do you expect readers to have a bigger problem with – Julie’s age or dress size?***

She’s a size 10 or 12 depending on the cut, which is almost skinny when you consider that the average American woman is a size 16. I visualized her as a somewhat-smaller Joan from *Mad Men*; I doubt there’s a straight man in America who’d turn down Christina Hendricks if she showed up on his doorstep asking to spend the night. At the same time, she’s closer to the average female reader’s size and looks than she is to that of the average Bond girl, so they shouldn’t hate her too much.

So – age. I expect the male readers to go “ew” when they do the math on Julie’s and Matt’s relative ages. To them I say: Elle Macpherson is 53 – have you seen her Instagram pictures lately? On the other hand, I hope my female readers will watch Julie reel in Matt and say, “You go, girl.”

***You describe some of the things Matt does – such as working the camera at the conservation lab, and disassembling the painting – with lots of detail that seems very authentic. How much of that comes from personal experience, and how much from research?***

Practically none of it is personal experience. YouTube is one of God’s greatest gifts to writers. Personal experience kicks in when I talk about navigating through these spaces, the weather and the smells and so on.

***As far back as Doha 12, your supporting characters have been very vivid and memorable. In Stealing Ghosts, two stand out: Simpson Boutelle, the forger, and Miranda, the con artist. I could see either of them starring in his or her own story. Why do you invest so much in these secondary characters?***

The supporting players are a lot of fun because they don’t have to carry a whole novel on their own. I can go wide with them. Strong personalities like theirs will wear out a reader in very short order – I can’t imagine spending three hundred pages with Boutelle, for instance – but they’re entertaining over a couple dozen pages. Also, this is a series. Every secondary character I introduce and don’t kill has a shot at showing up in another book down the line. It would be nice if regular readers remember him or her from the last time they met.

***Most of the action is set in England, but in Portsmouth rather than London. Why Portsmouth?***

Everybody uses London. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a great city, but it’s overused. I happen to like Portsmouth; it’s a nice mid-sized city, very human-scaled, and the *Mary Rose* Museum is one of my favorites. I considered Southampton – my only other attempt at a series was partly based

there – but I just don't like the place as much. Portsmouth has a couple locations that turned out to be perfect for my needs.

***Such as the building you use for the Mainwaring Gallery, from which Matt has to steal Dorotea's portrait. It's actually a bookstore.***

Yes, it's a Waterstone's. I had to create the Mainwaring because (a) a real museum would object to me saying its security sucks, and (b) I'd never be able to get from a real museum the level of detail I'd need to write the heist. I've loved museums for as long as I can remember, and during my midlife crisis, one of the possible careers I considered was museum exhibit design. Getting to create my very own museum was a blast. The Dundas Lane Support Facility, where the Mainwaring's conservation lab is supposed to be, is another repurposed existing building.

***You like to use real places, especially hotels and restaurants. Why do you do this, and does it create any problems for you?***

I think using real places grounds the action. I hope it's fun for people who know the cities to see places they may be familiar with showing up in a novel. It's also easier to create a setting if it already exists. Writing's hard enough without making work for myself.

The biggest problem is making sure I have enough research material to get the place right. TripAdvisor is a godsend for that. The reviewers upload pictures of the damndest things – bathrooms, desks, closets, water features, you name it. If you read the reviews, you find out things like, "Room 308 is right above the backup generator, which turns on at 2 a.m." or "The bread basket is just slices of Wonder bread." You can't make up this stuff.

***Have you been to all the locations in the book?***

All except Salzburg. It's unfortunately been years since I was in Vienna. I was in Portsmouth in November 2016, which was very helpful since that's when Matt's there, so I could get the weather right and include real-life things like the Christmas Market outside the Mainwaring.

***Stealing Ghosts is the second installment in the DeWitt Agency Files series. You wrote two standalone thrillers (Doha 12 and South) before this. How is writing a series different, and which do you prefer?***

With a series, I already know the recurring characters, and I know how they talk and walk and speak. I can stretch out a character arc over several books. That's a luxury, but it's also a problem – how many books are there going to be? How do I catch up readers who are new to the series without annoying the regulars? Also, each book makes the next one harder because I've used up one more storyline.

Standalones, on the other hand, are one-and-done. I can do essentially anything I want. Kill the hero? Destroy important places or things? Why not? There's a lot of freedom there. At the same time, I have to complete the story and the character arcs in four hundred pages, I have to build a world that I'll throw away after I'm done, and I spend a year with imaginary people who will disappear when I write "The End."

I can't tell yet which I prefer. Each has its ups and downs. After I finish the third DeWitt novel – I'm outlining it now – I may need to take a break from these people and do something different. We'll see.

***Do you already know what will happen to Matt, Carson [Note: Matt's ex-cop partner], and the rest five or ten books from now?***

I have general goals for each of them. I already have an idea of what the last book will be about. What I don't know is how far down the road that will be.