

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

**Zrada is the “Carson book” you’ve been talking about for some time. For the people who haven’t read the three DeWitt Agency Files novels, who is Carson?**

Carson is a disgraced ex-Toronto cop who works for Allyson DeWitt, Matt Friedrich’s [*Note: the series lead*] boss. She was in *The Collection* as Matt’s handler and possible competitor, and in *Stealing Ghosts* as his partner-in-crime. They had a tetchy relationship in the first book and a more collegial one in the second. In *Chasing Clay*, she was a voice on the phone to whom Matt turned for advice.

The crude way to describe Carson is that she’s the muscle of the pair, while Matt is the brains. But it’s more complicated than that. Carson’s smart and grounded, but she’s also hard-nosed and blunt. She tends to solve problems kinetically while Matt talks or thinks his way out of trouble. We know that she came from a large family, plays hockey, is extremely fit, likes street markets, and has another employer who’s even sketchier than Allyson.

### **Why write a story featuring Carson?**

*Chasing Clay* was my third novel in a row starring Matt. Because they’re written in first-person point-of-view, I was deep inside Matt’s head for over three years. I needed something else to do for a while.

More than that, readers seem to love Carson. I’m not sure why. It could be that Carson is relatable: she isn’t especially attractive (Matt describes her as “on the okay side of plain”), she’s down-to-earth, and she wears very functional clothes. We rarely see a female character like her in mysteries or thrillers and hardly ever on TV. It could also be because she tackles problems head-on with very simple solutions, while Matt is all about wheels-within-wheels. You know that scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where Indy’s chasing through an Egyptian town and runs into a big guy with a sword? The big guy goes through this elaborate thing with the sword to show how tough he is, then Indy just shakes his head and shoots the guy. The audience *always* applauds. That’s Carson.

### **She’s also got a potty mouth. Carson swears a lot. Is that at all realistic?**

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 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, and mentoring other women, so no guy will dare hit on her. The other way around 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 the second way while she was with the Toronto Police Service. She hasn't changed because she's still in that kind of environment, even though she doesn't have a badge anymore.

**Several of the characters refer to Carson as "big." That's a loaded word when describing women. How is Carson "big," and why did you choose that for her?**

Carson is tall, solid, broad-shouldered, and has a lot of definition. She's 5'-9", 150 pounds (mostly muscle), and wears a U.S. size-10 dress. If you want to see what that can look like in practice, try [this picture of former MMA fighter Erin Toughill](#) (she's 5'-10" and fought at 160 pounds) (clearly, she's been glammed up for a photo shoot—[this is what she looks like at work](#)).

Why is Carson this size? So she can do her job. Both as a cop and now as an enforcer of sorts, she regularly has to deal effectively with men who mean her physical harm. The Hollywood way of approaching this problem is to have someone like Kate Beckinsale (5'-7", 117 pounds, size 4) take on enemies who are 50% larger and somehow beat them down, maybe while wearing heels and a tight dress. In the real world, they wouldn't have a chance. Carson has to be strong enough to both inflict and take punishment; waifs can't do that.

It wasn't until I started writing Carson that I came to realize how common she is in the real world. I see her at the gym and at the police department where I work. We just don't see them on TV or in the movies.

For some perspective, the average American woman is 5'-4", 170 pounds, and wears a size 16. In the Ukraine, where the story takes place, the numbers are 5'-5" and 160 pounds.

**Not only do you have a new protagonist, but you're writing in a new genre.**

Not new, just different from the DeWitt books. I wrote *Doha 12* and *South*, both standalone thrillers, before Allyson came along. Action/adventure stories work like thrillers except with lower stakes. I already know how to write this way; it's not like I switched to historical romance.

I wanted to do something different, and that included a different genre. I also wanted to tell a different kind of story. *Zrada* started life as the third Matt book, but it was entirely the wrong story for him. Carson's personality lends itself to more speed and action, and a wider range of inciting incidents.

**Typically in a story such as this, the heroine's sidekick would be a potential love interest. You didn't do that in *Zrada* (or did you?) Where did Galina come from?**

Galina Demchuk is a holdover from when this was a Matt story; she was supposed to be a Carson substitute as well as the local guide. When Carson entered the picture, Galina took on a different role. As the holder of local knowledge, she can deal with Carson on a more-or-less equal basis, but she embodies a different kind of strength. She's emotional, religious, and has a

strong sense of right and wrong. She believes in causes and has acted on her beliefs. One of the other characters describes her as a zealot, while Carson calls her an idealist. All of this is mostly the opposite of Carson. I wanted to give Carson someone to butt heads with but also to come to trust.

I know the thriller SOP says the hero and heroine are supposed to end up in bed halfway through the story. I wanted to avoid that. Not only are there no opportunities for that to happen in this timeline, but I think it's an overused trope that tends to diminish the heroine and enhance the hero. This is Carson's story and she doesn't need a man to moon over to do her job.

Both Carson and Galina are very straight. Anybody shipping them is wasting their time.

***There's still an art connection in Zrada's plot. Is that a leftover from when it was Matt's story, or is it something you intended for Carson all along?***

Like the DeWitt novels, this plot has roots in a real-world situation. The plot existed before I had characters to throw into it.

***What's the real story?***

On 10 January 2005, burglars stole 24 paintings from the Westfries Museum in the Netherlands. Ten years later, an ultra-rightist Ukrainian militia offered to let the museum buy them back for €50 million. Negotiations crawled along, with the number of paintings for sale shrinking steadily while a private "art detective" the museum hired tried to conclude a deal. In April 2016, the Ukrainians seized four of the artworks; in May, the buyer of another one turned it back to the museum. The rest are still missing and may be in Russian *mafija* hands. The Westfries Museum has [a comprehensive timeline on its website](#). The *Guardian* also [ran a good story in late 2015](#).

When I saw this, I immediately thought, "What if this happened in the Donbass, which is the Wild West? How messy could it get?" That's what writers do: make things messier.

***The Ukrainian conflict has been around since 2014 and seems to have faded into the background. What drew you to it?***

The incredible messiness of it all. The narrative in the Donbass [*Note: a breakaway province in the far eastern part of Ukraine*] is as convoluted as it gets. What started as popular discontent among the ethnic-Russian population was quickly hijacked by pro-independence radicals backed by Moscow to hobble Ukraine's embrace of the West. It was also Russia's way of distracting the world from the "popular uprising" they stage-managed in Crimea so they could annex the place. Now the pro-independence faction is frustrated because Russia doesn't want the region but won't let them set up their own nation; the Donbass residents still loyal to Kyiv are stuck with "governments" that are largely legal mafias; and the people who don't care are mired in Third-World conditions and a sputtering, ongoing war.

On the other side of the contact line, the rest of Ukraine lingers from one hapless government to another. It's stuck with a frozen conflict it can't end until its big neighbor loses interest. That keeps it from solving its many other problems. The tragedy here is that a nation that should be so rich is such a mess.

Sounds fun, right?

***It sounds like the situation in Central Europe between the world wars. You've mentioned your admiration for Alan Furst, who writes about those shadow wars. Is this your homage to him?***

I like stories with people who have different agendas and who all think they're heroes. This slow-rolling disaster is perfect for that kind of thing. Galina, Mashkov, Stepaniak, and Rogozhkin all think they're right and they could all be heroes in a slightly different story. Furst does that well; I hope I'm even halfway as good at it.

***What was the most difficult aspect of researching this novel?***

Figuring out what the places look like and what's where. StreetView stops being useful outside central Donetsk, which we don't visit. Our Heroes pass through a lot of small towns on their journey. None of them are tourist destinations or economic or population hubs, so there's not a lot of photo or video documentation about them. I did a lot of searching through the web in English, Russian, and Ukrainian to find pictures and videos of like-sized places in the same general area. I also used the hell out of Google Earth, especially the historical imagery.

***You speak Ukrainian and Russian?***

Not Ukrainian. I took Russian in college, but I've lost the vocabulary. However, I can still read Cyrillic and work out the words, which is all I need to do when I'm looking for places. It's easy enough for me to go down a list, see Кальміуське, and know it's *Kalmiuske*.

***You usually send your characters to real places in real cities. Is that the case this time, or did you have to invent more places?***

All the towns and cities are real places and their basic forms are as authentic as I could make them. I did have to create abandoned houses and wrecked farms and industrial places for them to do their dirty work. Those are pretty common in the occupied areas – over a million and a half people fled the Donbass when the war started – so even if those particular ones don't exist, there are real-life versions nearby.

***This isn't an easy book to read because of the unfamiliar character and place names. Do you worry that readers will be put off by that?***

*Doha 12* featured groups of characters with Hebrew or Arabic names, as well as aliases. It's my second-most-popular novel. *South* had not only a fair amount of Spanish in it, but also slang from 2032. I developed downloadable cast lists and glossaries for these books, which I'm told help.

I haven't decided yet whether I'll include a map in *Zrada*. It wouldn't work particularly well in e-books, which make up most of my sales. I think I do an okay job of keeping the places in context. If you really get lost and need to know exactly where Dokuchajevsk is, I use the Google Maps spellings throughout so you can easily look it up on your phone or tablet.

I think readers who want to adapt will. Especially in the thriller and action genres, we regularly read stories full of people with foreign names going to places we've never heard of. It would be sad if we could set novels only in Britain or America because readers are scared of vowel or consonant surpluses.

***You call Zrada "A DeWitt Agency Adventure." Is this the start of a new series? If so, what happens to Matt's series?***

Depending on reader reaction, I can easily spin this into a branch of the DeWitt Agency universe. (If Stan Lee can do it, so can I.) Carson can work on more than art-related projects, and as we see in *Zrada*, she can get her hands very dirty, so there's a bigger arena for her to play in. Of course, if nobody buys *Zrada*, there's no point to writing sequels.

I expect to write more Matt books once I've cleaned my palate. Matt experienced some life changes in *Chasing Clay*. Allyson also threatened to "broaden [Matt's] horizons," whatever that means to her.

Carson won't go away no matter what happens to *Zrada*. She'll keep appearing in the DeWitt Agency Files books, just as Matt may show up occasionally in the Adventure books. Her relationship with Matt will continue to develop, just as she'll continue to evolve as a character. We'll see how it shakes out.