



Courtesy of Barry Lancet

Inspired by

True Events

By Antonio Vega

Author Barry Lancet discusses the many inspirations for his popular Jim Brodie fiction series & his recent interest in Hawaii

“Then this big burly Japanese guy in a uniform comes out and babbles at me in Japanese I can’t understand, waves me through, and takes me back into the inner offices of the building and down two or three halls, and then opens the door and gestures for me to go in.... I was just confused. So I go in the room and then [he] slams the door, and it turned out to be an interrogation room,” says Barry Lancet, recalling the incident in the ’80s that planted the seed that would eventually bloom into his popular series of Japan-centered thrillers. Currently comprising four installments, the books follow the adventures of Jim Brodie, a single father and expert in Japanese art whose role as the part-owner of a Tokyo-based private investigations firm keeps getting him entangled in international plots involving some of the world’s most dangerous entities.

Having grown up in Southern California, Lancet moved to Japan in his 20s, and after about three decades working in the publishing industry, he made his debut as a novelist in 2013 with the first Jim Brodie book, *Japantown*. Praised for its exciting plot that manages to thrill readers while at the same time educating them

about Japan, the book quickly became a smash hit, even earning Lancet three Best Debut Novel awards and citations. But you’re probably wondering what Lancet did that landed him in a Japanese interrogation room. Much like when reading one of Lancet’s books, you’ll just have to keep reading to satisfy your curiosity...

A Life-Changing Detour

Although the books that have thrust Lancet into prominence are a direct result of his love of Japanese culture and history, in a way Lancet discovered his deep interest in Japan by accident. He says that as a college student in the in California in the late ’70s, he wanted to visit Europe and eventually work in a publishing house in Paris or London. In anticipation of this, he began saving up money and decided to take time off from school to go on an exploratory trip across the Atlantic. However, as he was planning his trip, a Japanese acquaintance suggested that he visit Japan as well. “I said, ‘Maybe I’ll take the long way around to Europe and stop over in Japan.’ I said it as a joke, but the more I thought about it, I thought—well, it’d be kinda fun. So I did it, just to see

what Japan was about.”

Without access to the wealth of information provided by the Internet, Lancet did not quite know what to expect before arriving in Japan. Once there he became fascinated by the country, and soon after this return to the U.S. and subsequent graduation, he began looking into returning in order to learn more about the culture and to learn the language. Realizing that there was a thriving English-language publishing industry in Japan, Lancet set his sights on Tokyo.

Effortless Learning

One of the things that Lancet always tries to do in his books is teach people about history and culture in a fun and exciting way. Lancet says that many of his readers, including those who previously didn’t know much about Japan, have really loved his approach. “They said they loved reading the thriller and they learned something, and that just so rarely happens. And it’s painless learning [laughs]. You don’t have to work very hard. I wanted to give people a sense of what I was living and experiencing.”

Laying the Foundation

Roughly five years after his first visit, Lancet was back in Japan. After a brief period teaching English and freelancing in the publishing industry, Lancet found a job as an editor in the international arm of the major Japanese publisher Kodansha. At this job Lancet was able to work on a never-ending stream of book projects that taught him about all aspects of Japanese art, culture, and history. Further, the job allowed him to meet all kinds of people—from artists, to famous chefs, to scholars, and even politicians. He says he still draws upon much of what he was exposed to during this time when writing his books.

The Spy across the Table

During his many years in Japan, Lancet has had a wide range of unique experiences, many of which he has used when writing the Jim Brodie books. Among these is the time he sat down for a conversation with a stranger at a wedding party. “He was a Soviet spy, KGB...and he wasn’t that secretive about it,” says Lancet jokingly. Lancet explains that the mysterious Soviet was a master at getting people drunk in order to mine them for information. And that is exactly what he tried to do over the course of their roughly 90-minute conversation, due to Lancet’s many connections to prominent individuals in Japan. “I don’t know what he did, but he was drinking as much as I was—and I can hold my liquor—but it didn’t affect him at all. At all!” Thankfully for Lancet, he was able to dissuade the spy from further contacts. He later used this Soviet agent as the basis for a Chinese spy who makes his first appearance in Lancet’s second book, *Tokyo Kill*.

Questioned and Confused

It was during his second year in Japan that the incident that Lancet points to as the original inspiration for the Jim Brodie series occurred. At the time he was living with his wife in an apartment on the second floor of his in-law’s house. When he arrived home one Saturday evening, there was a message from the authorities waiting for him, asking him to come down

to his local police station. Lancet recalls that this resulted in a bit of an awkward evening between him and his in-laws. “Everybody went to bed angry and mad at me and thinking they had a criminal under their roof.”

At the station the next morning, Lancet was promptly escorted to an interrogation room, where he sat for around 45 minutes before a well-dressed silver-haired English-speaking senior inspector walked in and proceeded to very strategically ask Lancet about just about every single aspect of his life, including how much money he had, his dating history, and his employment in the U.S.—all the while skirting Lancet’s inquiries about why he had been called in. As the questioning continued, it began to dawn on Lancet that his future in Japan may just depend on how he handled this

interaction. “I realized that for whatever reason I was being questioned, if I didn’t answer the questions to appease this fellow, they would throw me out of the country. And after all that time it took to get the visa, I didn’t want that to happen, so I was walking a sort of tightrope.”

About three hours after walking into the police station, Lancet was let go and told why the police had taken an interest in him. It was all because of an innocent oversight on Lancet’s part. He had forgotten to report to his local government office that he had renewed his visa a few months earlier. However, rather than becoming irate, Lancet left thoroughly fascinated with the inspector’s masterful technique, and eventually decided to use this as the creative spark he had been looking for. “When I came out of that office, I’d been wanting to write a book for a long time, and I thought, ‘Maybe I can write some sort of mystery or a thriller based on this.’ And in the end that inspector became one of the characters in the series, and that big burly grumpy guy became another character.”

More to Come

It would end up taking Lancet many years and many rewrites before he finally

Lancet in Hawaii

For the past few years Lancet has been visiting Hawaii regularly to visit family members who live here. Over the course of his visits he came to be fascinated by Hawaii’s rich history, so much so that it motivated him to write a standalone book set in the Hawaiian Islands. “I’m interested in the intersection where cultures meet.... In Hawaii what’s really fascinating is you have this sort of mix of so many cultures that’s happened over the decades, starting from the days when the missionaries came, and then the sugar plantations and the pineapple plantations. You have Japanese and Koreans [who] came over, and some Filipinos came, some Portuguese. And then of course you have the Hawaiians and the Samoans and the other Polynesians that are here, and everybody’s living together on these islands. Hawaii is quite unique.”

got his first book published. But ever since that happened, Lancet has refused to slow down. In fact, with every book he seems to up the ante, both in terms of plot and the amount of research and effort he puts into each book. Between the next Brodie book he is working on and a new unrelated thriller—which his Hawaii fans will be happy to hear is set right here in the islands—it looks like Lancet fans have plenty of exciting adventures to look forward to. 終

Lancet’s first book, Japantown, is currently in the process of being developed into a pilot for a possible television show. For more information on Barry Lancet, you can visit his website at www.barrylancet.com.

Enter to win an autographed copy of *Japantown*, the first book in the Jim Brodie series. See page 47 for more details.

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Barry Lancet’s words to live by: “Never be afraid to make or take a leap!”