

AN INTERVIEW WITH

James Macomber, author of *A Grave Breach*

Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *A Grave Breach*?

It's hard to say. Writing *A Grave Breach* was not a continuous process. There were periods when I was not working on it. But, of the three novels, *A Grave Breach* took the longest. Bargained for Exchange surprised me in that it only took about 6-7 months, and Art & Part took a bit less. I would estimate that not counting interruptions, *A Grave Breach* still took about 12-14 months. The complexity of the plot was a factor. In fact, I did find myself tied up in knots – my own doing, of course – and on several occasions, I struggled to overcome difficulties and potential contradictions in both the characterization and in elements of the plot.

***A Grave Breach* is a complex book – alternating between locations and eras. How were you able to seamlessly weave together the various elements of the book? Is this a challenge for you?**

The complexity did give me fits at times. I had the basic plot line in my head before I started, but I made up the details as I went along. There were times when I had trouble making something fit and even a couple of instances where I had to go back and alter earlier parts of the book

***A Grave Breach* is rich with historical background. Do you stay true to history and reality?**

Yes -- as absolutely true and accurate as I can possibly be. That is extremely important to me. I don't ever want to be pedantic about the factual parts of a story, but I do enjoy hearing from readers who say that they learned something from the books, in addition to being entertained.

Why – and when - did you begin writing?

The “why” is a bit difficult. I have always wanted to write a book and I was once asked why I always wanted to write a book. I had no answer. My mother was a huge reader and lover of books and instilled that same love at an early age. The “when” was about mid-1995. I had decided I didn't care to take the Florida Bar Exam and my wife suggested I finally give writing a book a try – and I did.

I understand that this is the third novel in the John Cann series. Will John return for a fourth?

That is my intention. I've given – and continue to give – some thought to writing something that doesn't involve the same characters, but for now, I enjoy building on what I have written before, and introducing new things in that context.

Is John Cann in any way autobiographical?

In some ways, yes. I do have things in common with Cann – I am trained as a lawyer, and I've always been vitally interested in history, international relations, and geopolitics -- but I don't lay claim to the more heroic things Cann pulls off.

The characters who populate *A Grave Breach* are extremely real and credible -- definitely the type who will stay with readers long after they finish the book. Are any based on people you know or have encountered?

Some characters are based on real people, while some are “types” and others are composites of more than one individual. Some of the characters are partially based on real people; I occasionally take a person's good characteristics – or bad – and base the character on that. And some are plucked out of thin air.

What do you think is most admirable about the novel's protagonist, John Cann?

Most admirable: His strength, his loyalty and his compassion. From the beginning I wanted to create a character who wasn't just tough, but cared about people and acted consistently within his own code. Cann doesn't act precipitously, but when he is forced to take action, he takes action – with a firm belief in the restorative value of retribution.

Do you think Cann “goes too far” in his loyalty to Arthur Matsen, and do you think Matsen takes advantage of Cann’s loyalty?

Absolutely not -- to both questions. The loyalty is clearly a two-way street. When the time comes, Matsen doesn’t hesitate to put his life on the line for Cann.

Katherine Price is new to the John Cann series. With Arthur Matsen, she seems protective – almost as a daughter would be protective of a father, but with John Cann, there seems to be protectiveness tinged with an undercurrent of curiosity. Could this be a romantic interest? Will Katherine return and if so, do you see her evolving into a different role?

Katherine definitely will return. (I have a bit of a crush on her, I’m afraid.) She will remain a principal and her relationship with Cann is destined to grow. But it’s not just that she has a romantic interest in Cann; the reverse is true as well.

In your opinion, who is the hero in *A Grave Breach*? Is there more than one hero?

There is definitely more than one hero. There is a line in the book that reads, “Courage is not about not being afraid. Courage is about being afraid and doing it anyway.” With that in mind, there are several characters in *A Grave Breach* who act heroically.

Without giving too much of the plot away, do you think Sara Furden is ultimately a hero or a criminal? Both?

Furden is a tragic hero, and a victim. I do not see her as a criminal in any way.

On many levels, *A Grave Breach* is about memory – repressed memory, Matsen’s memories of Savka and Milica, Cann’s memories of Janie Reston never far behind him, and Djilic’s memory of events from decades past. To quote a line from the book, “sometimes a not so good memory is a good thing.” What do you think?

I think that “sometimes a not so good memory is a good thing.” I also think, as is said elsewhere in the book, “it’s all about context.” Is there any valid reason to make Janie remember what happened to her? My own feeling is that unless not remembering creates a problem – or she decides she wants to remember – why relive the suffering? And what would Milica remember if she remembered everything that happened to her? Not pleasant. And to what purpose? It all depends on context.

Who influenced your writing?

I didn’t consciously pattern my writing on anyone. When I sat down to write, I decided to just hit the keyboard and see what came out. Style-wise, I have always loved Fredrich Forsyth’s reality/fiction combination and have no doubt that’s where my own mix comes from. And I loved Clancy’s plotting device of having more than one story going on at the same time, and the bringing the stories together. I will also say that Leon Uris was an influence – I read his books as an adolescent -- and Michener’s *Bridge at Andau* haunts me to this day.

What do you hope readers take away from this book?

Aside from a sense of a story well told, I hope the reader carries away a respect and affection for the good guys, contempt and hatred for the bad ones, and an abiding satisfaction that the bad guys got what they deserved.

How does the process of writing work for you – do you know the plot before you begin or does it evolve?

The process itself has evolved – and continues to evolve. In *Bargained for Exchange*, I had the opening scene in mind (it really happened, by the way) and nothing else. I made it up as I went along. In *Art & Part*, I had more of the story in mind before I started writing. And in *A Grave Breach*, I had most of the plot line complete but, again, no details; the details come during the process of writing.

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How many languages do you speak?

It depends on where I am at any given time. I'm fairly comfortable in French, German, Italian, and Spanish and I have a very basic knowledge of Russian. Now that's not to say I'm equally fluent in all of them. I can read and write somewhat fluently in French and can read a lot of Spanish and Italian. I learned German by immersion, so reading and writing in German are difficult for me.

You write as someone who is experienced in international law. How does your professional experience impact your books?

I've always had an interest in history, international relations, and geopolitics, so an interest in international law follows logically. That and having been a lawyer, I hope, gives accuracy and credibility to what I write.

Do you have plans to write outside the international legal thriller genre?

I've considered it, but I expect I would get a plot idea first and then write, as opposed to making a concerted effort to write outside the genre. I like the genre.

What's next for James Macomber?

Happy hour at Gilligan's.