



A C o n v e r s a t i o n w i t h

J I M L Y N C H

a u t h o r o f

B o r d e r S o n g s

Q: What was your inspiration for *Border Songs*? Were there any actual incidents on the Canadian/U.S. border that gave rise to the idea for this novel?

A: I got hooked on the notion of setting a novel along the border after several trips up there as a journalist looking into security fears and marijuana smuggling. The western end of the border is not only gorgeous but a mindbender, too, seeing how the two countries are often divided by nothing more than a drainage ditch. Just the sight of the ever increasing number of green-and-white Border Patrol cars traversing the quiet farmlands was enough to get the novel rolling in my head. And yes, there were many news flashes on both sides of the ditch that helped inspire this story.

Q: Did you have to do much research for this novel? Ride around with border-patrol agents? Talk to folks who might have some insight into running a vast and highly organized marijuana smuggling business? Or operating a dairy farm? How close to the border do you yourself live?

A: I did lots of research, first as a reporter, then as a novelist. The Border Patrol tripled its northern force during the two years after 9-11. But when I rode along with agents it became obvious that nobody was catching terrorists. What they were primarily doing was intercepting huge loads of British Columbia marijuana bound for big cities in the West. I watched agents marvel like teenagers over piles of potent buds. I interviewed Canadian activists and growers and found the B.C. marijuana scene amusing. While the U.S. government beefed up its drug war and called pot a deadly gateway drug, Canada flirted with legalization and grew so much marijuana indoors that Forbes called "B.C. bud" the province's largest agricultural export. One grinning smoker/grower explained to me that "the problem with Americans is that you're so euphoriaphobic." My research also included hanging out on a small dairy farm. I read books on birds, dyslexia, autism and landscape art too. I live about 150 miles south of the border.

Q: The idea of borders--between places, between people, between the natural world and the man-made, between past and future ways of life--runs through this novel. When you set out to write a story that takes place on an actual border, did you have all these bigger themes in mind?

A: I was aware of the parallels as they arose, but I didn't set out to create them. I trusted the setting, the characters and the material and tried to harness all the potential as the story evolved. My lasting impression of the Canadian border is that it's there to create an illusion of security. It feels arbitrary and, in many ways, nonsensical, which is probably an apt description for most of the borders we erect between each other and between generations, eras and places. The closer you look at the western half of the border, the sillier it gets. It's supposed to follow the invisible 49th parallel, but the thin and imprecise boundary overgrows too fast for crews wielding chainsaws and weed whackers to maintain it. Many miles of it aren't defined or patrolled, yet that doesn't stop the recurring cries to "Secure the border!" This all struck me as provocative and comic material.

K N O P F Q & A

Q: Brandon Vanderkool is such a wonderful character and certainly an unlikely hero. Where did he come from? He seems in some respects a counterpart to Miles, the protagonist of your first novel, *The Highest Tide*. But while Miles is exceptionally short, Brandon's exceptionally tall; and whereas Miles is fascinated by marine life, Brandon's passion is focused skyward toward birds. Not a coincidence, I'm guessing?

A: I've always admired highly observant people. So it probably makes sense that I've created a couple protagonists who tune into cool stuff that most of us miss. I wanted to create a rookie Border Patrol agent who was oddly and uniquely suited for the work despite his youth and awkwardness. Brandon is the one agent who's lived along the border his whole life, so he notices what doesn't belong. He's also far more alert than the average agent, in part because he's constantly scanning the terrain for unusual birds and opportunities for landscape art. In the beginning, I made Brandon so tall to amuse myself. But once he started to emerge on the page his extreme height seemed to fit his extreme mind and it was too late to make him anything other than exactly what he is.

Q: A real wonder for and reverence of the natural world pervades your novels. What in your life has fueled your interest in nature?

A: I've spent most of my years in western Washington state, which is a soggy wonderland of mountains, bays and forests. We arguably don't have all that much history or culture out here, but we've got some of the finest rain forests, glaciers and tidal flats in the world. Many of the moments I've felt most alive have been in these settings -- hiking, sailing, climbing, laughing.

Q: We have to ask: Are you a birder? Because only someone very well versed in the bird world and bird songs could so beautifully bring to life the birds that fly through this novel.

A: Thanks. I'm somewhat of a birder now, but I wasn't when I started into this novel. That was one of the treats of the research, learning how to identify birds. Along the way, I hung out with some of the best birders in the West, people so focused they filter everything else out and see and hear nothing but birds. Looking through their eyes, the world looked very different. As far as obsessions and habits go, I consider birding a healthy one.

Q: Of Brandon you write, "Some people blamed his oddities on his dyslexia, which was so severe that one glassy-eyed pediatrician called it a gift: While he might never learn how to spell or read better than the average fourth grader, he'd always see things the rest of us couldn't." Are you suggesting that it takes someone who literally sees things most people don't -- and perhaps someone who is (literally) larger than life -- to begin to straddle these borders?

A: What you get with Brandon is someone who simply sees very clearly. Most of our minds are cluttered with to-do lists, our vision clouded by preconceptions. Brandon just sees things as they are, which makes him exceptional. Sometimes that helps him straddle or overcome borders, but it often leaves him on the outside looking in. I've known oddly gifted dyslexics and have been intrigued when dyslexics and autistics describe their mental process as "thinking in pictures." Temple Grandin's books explained to me how her autism makes it nearly impossible to socialize but gives her a big advantage in understanding animals. During this same research binge, videos of Andy Goldsworthy's temporary landscape art gave me ideas on the sort of impromptu art Brandon might attempt while patrolling the border. The more I got to know him, the more appropriate it felt to put him at the center of this unusual setting and story.

K N O P F Q & A

Q: Brandon's father, Norm, is in danger of losing his farm, and his mother, Jeanette, in danger of losing her memory. It seems these two potential losses are related to a bigger sense of the loss of a way of life. As you write, ". . . what pissed Norm off even more than dairies turning into berry farms was dairies turning into cul-de-sacs or toy ranches for the rich. And worst of all was when the rich left the barns and silos standing out of some do-gooder nostalgia for an America they never knew." Are we as a country losing our memory?

A: We have a short history and short memories to go with it, especially in the West where most people come from somewhere else and few families have been here for more than a few generations. What I was trying to capture with Norm was this sense that you can suddenly look around and find yourself stranded, left behind in yesterday's America, which is how most family farmers have been feeling for years. Jeanette's sudden dementia is a different, more personal loss, but carries a similar uneasy jolt that what you took for granted has already slipped away.

Q: *Border Songs* is populated by so many interesting people. Is there any one character in the novel you most identify with?

A: I identify with them all to some degree -- with Wayne's irreverence, Madeline's recklessness, Sophie's curiosity, Brandon's fascination -- but Norm's hopeful, worrying, temptation-addled mind made him the easiest character for me to climb inside.

Q: Who are some of your favorite writers, and what's next for you?

A: Ken Kesey, Ian McEwan, John Steinbeck, Joan Didon, Raymond Carver, Richard Price, Tom Robbins, Robert Penn Warren, Kent Haruf, etc.

I'm now researching a novel that I want to set in Seattle. I'd say more about it but I'd rather not jinx it.

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