

# Jance finds unlikely heroes in her fiction

'There are little pieces of me in all my books'

By NANCY MCCARTHY  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

**W**hen author J.A. Jance discusses the key characters in her mystery books, they seem more like old friends than personalities from her imagination.

She “met” retired Seattle police chief J.P. Beaumont 30 years ago on a train to Portland; they have the same birthday. Arizona Sheriff Joanna Brady is short because the 6-foot, 1-inch Jance wanted to know what it was like to be short.

During a recent talk and book-signing sponsored by the Cannon Beach Library, Jance sat in an overstuffed chair on the Coaster Theatre stage. She said her stories often come from personal experience.

“There are little pieces of me in all of my books,” she said.

Jance, 72, demonstrated her humor, which could easily turn into a sharp retort when fielding audience questions. She laughed at her mistakes and became emotional when she talked about her parents.

“Eighty-one years ago today, my parents were married,” Jance said. They were together 68 years and had seven children. Her mother cooked three meals a day for nine people, washed dishes, volunteered with community organizations and kept an organized house.

“She could have been a general,” said Jance, who was the first member of the family to earn a four-year college degree. After her graduation, Jance admitted, she became an “unbearable snob” toward her mother, who had only a seventh-grade education. She read a poem from her 1984 book of poetry, “After the Fire,” in which she wrote, “It is impossible for me and my



PHOTO BY NANCY MCCARTHY

Author J.A. Jance

mother to be sisters.”

That attitude remained until, Jance admitted, she had children of her own.

## 'I cried like hell'

When her mother died a few years following her father's death, Jance said she shed no tears because she knew her parents finally were reunited. But in her novel, “Damage Control,” she wrote a scene where an elderly couple drive off a cliff similar to the death scene in the movie “Thelma and Louise,” and the tears broke free.

“I cried like hell when I wrote that scene,” Jance recalled.

She also included a scene in the book involving a memorial for a fallen officer. Jance said she wrote it in memory of her brother, Jim, an Arizona firefighter, who died unexpectedly of a heart attack several years before her parents' deaths.

Another personal experience, which ended up in a J.P. Beaumont story, revolves around guilt. She didn't attend the funeral of Doug Davis, a high school friend from Bisbee, Arizona, because she didn't know, until after the funeral, of his death at age 22

while serving in Vietnam. Years later, after meeting the woman who had been engaged to Davis, Vance decided to write a Beaumont “prequel” — “Second Watch” — in which Beaumont searches for his friend's missing fiancée.

“People who have read my book have sought out the cemetery and left tokens of appreciation on his grave,” Jance said. “Being a writer is a very good job sometimes.”

The popular writer is closely followed by her fans, who remind her of mistakes or ask about the well-being of her characters. “When I had Beau do a lot of drinking so he would have something to do with his hands, readers would ask, ‘Does J.P. Beaumont have a drinking problem?’”

“The author was the last person to realize it,” Jance said. In the next Beaumont book, “Minor in Possession,” Beaumont goes into treatment.

## Imperfect art

To those who point out mistakes in her 50-plus books, (she publishes at least one a year; the newest Beaumont book is out this month), she recalls the lesson she

learned from basket weavers on the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation, where she was a librarian. Mistakes, Jance said, “are my contribution to making sure my art is not perfect. Only the Great Spirit is perfect.”

While fielding questions from the audience at the Coaster, Jance displayed her humor, and a bit of impatience.

When a man asked her if she worked from an outline, Jance told him that, in her 30 years of doing book-signings, it's usually a male who asks that question, and it's usually a retired engineer. The questioner admitted that he was a retired chemical engineer.

Jance said she hated outlines. Instead, she added, she starts with someone who is dead, then she spends “a lot of time figuring out who did it and how come. Occasionally, I paint myself into a corner.”

The first 20 percent of the book is difficult to write, the middle 60 percent is somewhat easier, and the last 20 percent is a “banana peel, and that's when I know where the end will be. That's when I find out what the end is,” Jance said. 