

A novelist who hates novels:

Jonar Nader unveils the story behind Z

by Wesley Britton



Speculative fiction, appropriately, is an umbrella incorporating a wide net of genres and sub-genres. On one end, there's science-fiction showcasing futures where humanity has made bad choices. In the middle are more grounded warnings from the likes of Tom Clancy and Duane De Mello who know dangerous foes are not defeated by playing within black-and-white rules. On the other end, there are simple escapist entertainments by the likes of Clive Cussler and Jack Higgins where technological “McGuffans” are merely the devices that masterminds trot out for world domination, before brave and bold adventurers save us all once again.

Then, after the end of the Cold War, writers like Charles Cummings explored speculative “what ifs” with evildoers representing rogue nations, drug or smuggling cartels, and terrorists that are either Jihadists or literary surrogates for them. Other writers give us novels demonstrating that the most worrisome forces out there today are greedy international corporations with amoral agendas willing to use any scientific and technological marvel to gain power. In such stories, intelligence agents (and even the agencies they represent) are often outmatched, outgunned, and powerless to battle entities with tentacles deep in institutions that the gullible think are regulated by law, government oversight, even international treaties. As a result, fictional heroes who uncover frightful conspiracies aren't likely to find one handy villain to thwart, but rather onion skins of pawns, front companies, and unseen targets hiding behind elaborate smokescreens and magic curtains.

Frequently, such books are dense, intense, layered. The best of such projects aren't simple imaginings of what might happen if, say one terrorist group or another pull off some catastrophic event, but rather have themes that are cautionary, eye-opening, educational. Such is the case with Z: A

Diary. Z is the first of a trilogy of books by debut novelist Jonar Nader. Z is remarkable for many reasons. It's remarkable due to the fact Nader, as he discusses in the interview below, doesn't read novels himself. His fiction is rather a rich scaffolding to set up global events he wants to expound upon in the third book of his trilogy—a book he hasn't written yet. Equally as remarkable is that Nader is far more an insider of corporate wheeling and dealing than any military or intelligence background, so the dark plot in Z rings with experience of a different kind from most "spy" writers. Much of what Nader calls "Diary One" of his series thus brims with a believability that is alarming in what Nader describes as a "war of destiny," a war a bit more significant than mere terrorism.

While the Lebanese-born writer claims no literary influences, Nader shows considerable mastery of story-telling techniques. The unfolding drama is framed by a "as told to" structure, so the reader knows we're looking into a past that changed a planet. It's chilling to realize that, even stripping the fantasy away, the future can be shaped by but a handful of humans with access to dangerous science who accomplish the worst terrorist attack possible. At its core, Z is the story of Jane Cook, a woman in prison remembering how her life changed after she becomes involved with increasingly dangerous circumstances, set in a hidden communications center under a mansion, and later while on the run from apparent corporate terrorists, ending up on a Chinese ship at sea helped by a captain who becomes a traitor from his own country. At first, Jane is as much an observer as she is a participant among a small circle of men with military, scientific, and industry connections learning about "Octo," a multi-national organization out for their blood and secrets. In the end, the reader learns how Jane has ascended into a leadership role with consequences that affects every human on earth.

It's worth noting Z is a book that was released with imaginative marketing. Uniquely, the original hardcover edition of Z had a live battery-operated LCD screen on the front cover. (See note at end—this version is no longer available.) At the end of the story, Nader provides sample chapters from his "How to Lose Friends" books and a link to an online 'missing' chapter from what is planned to be "Diary 2" in the series.

So what's behind this innovative tome? Spywise.net asked Jonar a few questions to dig deeper into his motives, background, and writing style—here's what he told us:

Q: What were the origins of, and influences on, the creation of Z?

A: When sitting alone at airports, I like to occupy my mind. One thing I do is to ask myself difficult questions. One day I asked myself if anyone in the world could appease all the groups and bring about peace. What could be done to arrive at peace? After months of thinking, I realized that there is no one on this planet with enough power or influence. So then I asked, 'What kind of person would we need, and what kind of power must we bestow upon them, so that they can have any hope of designing a peace plan?' These were important questions because many world leaders are only in power for a short time, and even then, they can hardly achieve real change, due to the bureaucracy and red tape. After eliminating several options, I was left with a world government, where the benevolent dictator would have to be in power for twenty years. And even with that scenario, I was unconvinced that we could arrive at peace. Human nature is too complex. Greed and corruption are part of the human makeup. So I realized that no one could ever bring about peace. So then I modified the question, and took the burden away from a person or a system of government, and started to think about an 'event' that might get people thinking more clearly about life and its beauty. I immediately dismissed cataclysmic events. A major disaster would change behavior, but not necessarily for the better. People might become greedier in their quest for survival. A major potion or virus that would result in people living for only 12 months would certainly be dramatic, but that, too, would be artificial, and people's behavior would be erratic, resulting in panic. It reached a stage where I challenged myself to arrive at a situation that would change the world, without changing our daily existence. In a way, I wanted everything to change, without changing the way that we live in general terms. And so I thought about the situation that is brought about through Z. However, I did not really want to write Z. I wanted to write about society's reaction to Z. But before I could do this, I had to outline, for the reader, how we got into that situation. So in truth, Z was never meant to be written. I was forced to write it to set the scene and explain what had happened. This means that I wanted to write a book that required an earlier story, which in turn that required yet

another earlier story. So now I ended up with a Trilogy. Z is now called Diary One. I will have to write Diary Two as well, before I can really start writing the book that I wanted to write in the first place. Diary Three is really where I wanted my mind to go. However, knowing people as I do, they would have too many questions, so I set about to answer those questions first, to avoid conflict with the reader later.

Q: What sort of research was involved to give the situations (scientific, military, etc) the verisimilitude, the believability of your story?

A: Over the years, I have observed human nature, and I understood that people can watch Star Trek, and accept the strangest of things, but only if they can trust that what they are seeing could be possible. However, if they see something that clashes with that believability, they will snap out of the hypnotic ride, or they become distracted. For example, I was watching a modern action film with thirteen-year-olds who could accept that one person could take on a gang of thugs, and that the one person could defy gravity with their karate moves, but the teenagers were disappointed when the hero walked in one door, and came out of the other door dressed in different clothes. They could not believe that anyone could change their clothes that quickly. This means that people might trust the author to take them to worlds that they do not understand. But if the author were to tell them something with which they do not agree, they will start to doubt everything. For example, if the reader is a good skier, or a good card player, or a computer enthusiast, and let's say that we describe a scenario with a software program and a computer system with which they are familiar, and we say something that they would imagine to be not possible, they will question the author, or worse, mock the author. If the author loses credibility, one is in trouble. For this reason, and knowing that my readers of Z would come from all walks of life, I could not describe a single thing without having it checked. So I contacted experts in every field, and questioned everything about military language, ballistics, sailing, protocol, history, language, explosives, technology, radar, helicopters; down to how large the fuel-tank is, and whether an aircraft can fly that distance on that tank of fuel. Can a listening device pick up from that range? Even the simplest of things, like how someone walks through a door, needs to be checked. For example, in Australia, a revolving door rotates clockwise, and this is how I had originally

described someone walking in. Then one day I was watching a British film and I jumped out of my chair, and thought that I saw something peculiar. It played on my mind, so I had to purchase a copy of that DVD and check that scene, and I noticed that the actor was walking through a revolving door anti-clockwise. So I contacted a few people in London and asked them to go to town and check a range of revolving doors. They confirmed this 'opposite way', so I had to modify that aspect of my chapter in Z. There is not a single move within the book, about a single aspect of science, geography, or even uniform and dress-code that has not been checked. It was exhausting, and people with whom I checked were perplexed when they, themselves, had never thought about the question.

Q: Especially evident in the debates among your characters, it seems clear you had a number of philosophical points you wanted to make in Z. However, I noticed a far more pessimistic tone to your novel from your far more optimistic “Mission Statement” at your website. Was this because the book is fantasy and not intended to be a reflection of your own views? What themes do you hope readers will consider that were mixed in with the adventure?

A: In all my work and my lectures, I like to leave the audience thinking, 'I had not thought of that before'. I dislike speakers and lecturers who spin such great yarns that cause people to nod in agreement. It all feels good. The audience then thinks that the speaker was 'one of us who understood us'. But what did they learn? I go to great effort to inject something new. And so I wanted people to think about things on which they would not normally have time to reflect. The book was not there to serve my voice. I have many ways to express my views via radio and television and my "How to Lose Friends" series. This novel had to stand on its own, and it had to be permitted to take a life of its own. The characters in my book "grew" and did things that I would not do, but the book is not about me. It is about the scenario, and that scenario had to be allowed to morph and develop naturally. So whether a character was good or bad, or pleasant or vulgar, that was not up to me, but up to the scenario as it unfolded. Z is not biographical. Sure, the characters had points to get across, and the points might have been negative, and opposite to my way of thinking about humanity or civility, but the characters had to be allowed to act freely, because that is part of the reality: people can

be greedy and corrupt, and I can't stop them just because I am the author. The theme within Z is to ask why this world is in such a mess. Why do people squander their opportunity to live?

Q: One idea, perhaps best illustrated in the “missing chapter” readers will find at your website, is that Jihadist terrorists aren't the real threat we face, but that we have more sophisticated groups to worry about. Can you elaborate on this? Do you think our intelligence agencies are missing something?

A: Former President George W. Bush did not send troops into Iraq for any reason that anyone in any of the media articulated correctly. He (and I mean the powers that be) were on a different mission. Sure, it was not WMD and it was not oil. It was something larger than Mr. Bush, but he was the front man. And so it is that all the general 'above the line' terrorism that we see, has nothing to do with any of the pawns in the game. Terrorism is not about where they place the next bomb. There are larger plans afoot. So we have a world with puppets on a string. Just go and watch a magician on stage. The audience is expected to watch something carefully, all the while it is something else that is happening before their very eyes which they cannot see. Z is designed to alert people to this. Only last week a friend took me to the Sydney Opera House to see a magic show. It was filled with unbelievable things. Afterwards, my friend was refusing to believe that the magician had switched something around. And I had to keep emphasizing that it is exactly what the magician wanted her to think. So he really did a great job, and she would not alter her perception of what happened, and she would argue with me saying, 'But I was there, I saw it,' and I could see how people can be conned and tricked, while they see things in front of them. Now think about the world of people who think they know, yet what they speak about was something they heard from someone else -- they were not even in the room at the time!

Q: While many writers have used cold-hearted corporations as villains in speculative fiction, I don't think I've seen one like Octo with so many tentacles into so many arenas of life. Is this fantasy or do you see parallels with what's happening now?

A: I have worked in corporate life, and I have many clients who are entangled in politics and greed and corruption. What I have seen over the last 25 years is that nothing is what it seems. One phone call can lean on one person, to change the course of a project that concerns the nation or that affects 30,000 people. The power and influence of non-officials is mighty, and they use it to suit their own greedy ends.

Q: You succeeded in establishing circumstances with global impact in rather tight settings—a prison, an underground hideaway, rooms on a Chinese ship. Was this a conscious means to keep the story focused on your cast of characters while establishing a rather claustrophobic realm in which they operated?

A: I was merely trying to show that power and influence takes place from unlikely places, and that little actions in little corners of the world can have grand impact.

Q: Your main cast consisted of intelligent and resourceful characters who were quickly established as independent thinkers. Were they modeled on people you've known who also share these characteristics?

A: I am not an experienced fiction writer. I have never read any work of fiction for pleasure. I can say that I have never read a novel. Even at school, when given something like *Catcher in the Rye*, I did not read it. I was lucky that a week before the exam, the movie was on television. One of my publishers was appalled at this discovery, so she purchased a box of books and insisted that I read one. I did. It was tedious. I hated the waste of time. Having completed the book two months later, I created a special framed certificate and presented it to her, saying that she was the first person in the world to have forced me to read a novel. So this explains to you that I have no idea about novels or how they ought to be structured. I really came to it from a 'blank' perspective. I had touched many novels in my time, but after the first para or after the first page, I would discard the book. My patience is very low for books. People had pleaded with me to try to plough through to the first chapter of any book, and I just had no tolerance. So I set out to write a book that would suit my brain. I did not care to appease the literary set. I

wanted to write what I thought was a good book for someone as intolerant as me. Having said that, I gave myself the freedom to do what had to be done, without falling into traps. So the book is not about me, and the characters are not people I know. I did not want my world to influence the book's world. Many of my test readers argued with me about the characters, and that's because I suspect they saw some characteristics that did not obey their predictable understanding of how certain characters would behave.

Q: The major means of making the takeover of the Chinese ship believable is that the captain has his own motives in terms of a proposed invasion of Taiwan. While this isn't a primary thrust of your story, does Taiwan seem to be a trouble-spot to be worried about in the future?

A: Yes. The future generation, bit by bit, will appear more recalcitrant towards China, because the future young people would not have had reason to fear China. They would not have had the experience. So they will antagonize China. And China, if it remains of its current mindset, will not back down. So it will have to teach the new generation a lesson. Unless China changes fundamentally, and there is no reason for it to do so, then Taiwan's rumblings in the future will be too risky for China, so it will have to retaliate. It cannot afford to set a precedent. China will turn a blind eye so long as no-one notices. But if its authority is challenged, it would stop at nothing, and now things would be made worse because the USA is not likely to give Taiwan any green lights. Another scenario is that Taiwan will be used and manipulated by the West, if the West sees China as a threat. Taiwan could be emboldened by way of manipulation. The Taiwanese will think that they are closer to independence, while those pretending to help Taiwan will be using it to spark unrest so as to distract China. But for now, everything is calm on the surface, so Taiwan had better watch its step. But young people will never learn unless they do it the hard way. Incidentally, the first hardcover edition of Z had to be printed in China due to the complex glass electronic LCD display on the cover. The shipment encountered difficulties in relation to the book and its contents. I was going to invite the Dalai Lama for a comment, but was warned that the Chinese would refuse to print the book in China. We were supposed to submit the book to the censors on CD, but we made some excuse and just said that the CD went missing etc, and

so the official who was supposed to vet the book, was lazy, and luckily, the book was approved. Had they have had a CD of the file, they would have conducted an automatic search, and found the word Taiwan etc in the book. A year later, when the paperback version was printed in China, someone did notice the Taiwan reference and so we had to do some very quick steps, ship the book, act dumb, and pay a fine. I must have a black mark next to my name now. I had other issues with my books in New Zealand. I landed in Christchurch to commence my national book tour, and that was the very morning that NZ was on high alert after its first terrorist threat with foot-and-mouth disease, and I was detained in Customs. Here was a Lebanese born author touting a book about terrorism, from a publishing company called Plutonium. When they asked me to show them a copy of this supposed book for this alleged book tour, I said that I did not carry a copy. Why? The book has an LCD display on the cover, with electronics and batteries and microchips built inside the cover. Therefore, under an x-ray, the book would look like a bomb. So now we have the words Lebanese, terrorism, bomb, and Plutonium, all in the same sentence. There was yours truly -- the defiant fighter, not taking any nonsense from these officials who were on red alert! Fun times.

Q: While it wouldn't be fair to reveal the twists of the ending, it seems clear you're about to leave Jane behind and write a sequel based on her "son" on the run. Can you share what readers might experience in the sequel?

A: Many readers do not think that JJ is her son. Throughout the book, some think it is a daughter, until it is revealed. As for the sequel, I can say that you cannot presume that Jane will not play a part. I do not know. However, the sequel could look at how the human race has managed to cope as a result of that scenario that Jane had inflicted upon the world. How would the churches and governments have reacted? Then Diary Three will look at the more natural part of what is happening, and how ecosystems develop under those scenarios.

For information on how to contact the author or the publisher, please visit <http://www.LoseFriends.com>

Z is now only available in paperback. According to Jonar, “The hardcover versions are now no longer working because the batteries have been disabled for security reasons, and there are only a few left in stock. The batteries were causing issues at airports and check-points. The book did look like a ticking time-bomb.”

Here is a link to a TV interview wherein the lady holds up the book, showing the LCD in action:

<http://www.logictivity.com/blog/for-legal-reasons-z-is-a-novel>

Here are the links to the two editions:

<http://www.logictivity.com/index.php?/merchandise/bookdetails/z-diary-one-hardcover>

<http://www.logictivity.com/index.php?/merchandise/bookdetails/z-diary-one-paperback>