

Books

Take a ride on a wave of international conspiracy



AUTHOR John F Hanley, a former deputy head teacher at Hautlieu School who grew up and worked in Jersey before retiring to Cornwall, has recently released the fifth novel in his Jack Renouf series, *Under The Tide*.

After he retired he began writing and published his first book, *Against The Tide*, in 2012, which introduced the character Jack Renouf, who, along with three of his friends, become caught up in a series of adventures, including the 1940 Helsinki Olympics and water polo at Havre des Pas.

The inspiration behind his writing is the author's fascination with the pre-war and German Occupation years, and John had often wondered what it would have been like if he had been an 18-year-old in 1939 instead of in 1965 and had to face the difficulties the previous generation faced. His first book was followed by *The Last Boat* (2013), *Diamonds For The Wolf* (2015), *Irish Lass* (2020) and the recently published *Under The Tide*.

This time the story opens on the same day, 9 July, but over 50 years later, in the same swimming location as *Against The Tide* in 1939.

Under The Tide begins with the assumed drowning, during a supervised swim at

Former Islander John F Hanley has just published the fifth novel in his Jack Renouf series, a mystery thriller which begins with an assumed drowning at Havre des Pas. He spoke to **Gill Kay** about the book and works of fiction to come

Havre des Pas, of his central character, Jack Renouf, who is a voluntary psychiatric patient in the Clinique Pinel. John describes the book as: 'A page-turning action, mystery thriller set in Jersey in 1990 – a time of 15% interest rates, rampant inflation, political unrest and Bergerac solving fictional crimes. The mystery is the disappearance of Jack Renouf. Has he drowned, been abducted or murdered, or is he in hiding? The protagonist is Rick Kemp, a disgraced former US naval of-

ficer and allegedly Jack Renouf's son, who believes that his real father died many years before.'

To unravel this mystery, Rick is sucked into a much wider conspiracy involving the CIA, Mossad and Iraqi intelligence. He travels to France, Israel, Egypt, Switzerland and Spain, encountering neo-Nazis and other forces determined to prevent extremely embarrassing secrets about American involvement with former SS officers after the war being exposed. Other themes emerge, such as wartime collaboration in German-occupied Jersey and the power of the establishment to cover up inconvenient truths.

Once again, the inspiration and background to the novel is rooted in Jersey's Occupation past, with the central idea originating in a booklet, German Fortifications in Jersey, which listed the completed and planned Holhgansanlagen (Ho tunnels). The booklet also has an intriguing comment about Ho 16-18, that nothing was known as to their location or purpose.

'Under the Tide was originally called Ho 17 and the climax of the novel takes place in the tunnel which I've placed under the hillside of Grands Vaux reservoir on the property of a residence already established as the home of a Nazi collaborator in the previous novels,' said John. 'During the construction of the reservoir back in the early 1950s my grandfather, Charles Renouf, was bedridden and being cared for in a property close to the site of the dam. My mother was in Overdale for six months with TB and I was in care. I could only see her once a month but I was allowed to visit my grandfather once a week.

'My walk through the valley was always fascinating because of the construction



■ The German underground tunnel Holhgansanlagen (Ho) 4 at Grands Vaux
Picture: TONY PIKE (34222121)

work. It lit a spark which I turned into the series. And Jack Renouf's incarceration in the hospital was an idea I picked up from an article about Barrie Cooper, who had petitioned the Queen to redress wrongs allegedly suffered due to his detention in the psychiatric unit in the 1960s,' said John, who trained at drama school and taught the subject for nearly 40 years, specialising in improvisation and training his students to construct stories by allowing characters and plots to develop themselves.

'These are the sort of techniques he used himself in his writing.

'I do carry out extensive and detailed research to create the milieu these fictional characters will inhabit but give them extensive freedom to interact and create through dialogue and action. Of course, I then have to shape this into a good read.'

The research for *Under The Tide* was mainly carried out while John was still living in Jersey. 'It's set in 1990, when the swimming pool at Havre des Pas was almost derelict and Bergerac was playing fast and loose with the Island's geography,' said John. 'My wife and I worked on some of the episodes as extras, or blobs as the production manager called us. I did have a sub-plot centred on the filming but my editor persuaded me to delete it.

'Incidentally, I nearly drowned at the pool when I was about seven. As the tide swept over the smaller pool I slipped off

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the wall into deep water. Fortunately, two older swimmers rescued me just as my mother threw herself in fully dressed, having run all the way down the beach.'

John also visited most of the locations mentioned in the novel, including Leon in northern Spain where he discovered that there was still a strong undercurrent of fascism and neo-Nazism barely hidden from sight.

John already has more books in the pipeline which may move further away from the Island setting and develop the new characters.

'America First, the fifth book chronologically, has been researched and I hope to finish it this year,' he said. 'While Jersey features in all of them, this one will be largely based in America, where Jack Renouf and some of the other characters will be working for British and Canadian intelligence to turn the tide of American public opinion in favour of intervening in the war against fascism.'

John added that there would be other novels set between 1941 and 1952. 'Originally, I expected to write ten evenly spread through the war years but, as my characters have dragged me down unexpected pathways, there might even be more. I also have the option to continue with Rick Kemp, as he has been recalled to the US Navy to help with the Iraq war. This would be an action thriller and also set in the 1990s.

'A further option is to write a different series with Rick's son, Joe, an American Ranger, as the protagonist but for the immediate future I will concentrate on Jack Renouf.'

He added that there would always be an episode or two set in Jersey relating to the Occupation.

'Operation Constellation has already been mentioned in *Irish Lass*,' he said. 'This was Churchill's attempt to appease Stalin by drawing up a plan to invade the Channel Islands to reduce the pressure on the Eastern Front. Constellation was the

overall mission plan but there were individual sections. "Condor" was the assault on Jersey, "Coverlet" on Guernsey and "Concertina" on Alderney.

'These were real enough and if followed through would have caused massive civilian casualties.

'In *Under The Tide*, Rick visits St Lo and discovers the total destruction caused by American Airforce bombers in suppressing the German defences before ground attack.

'According to these 1943 plans, similar bombers would have been used to flatten the fortifications on the islands before a seaborne and airborne invasion.'

John and his wife live in Cornwall, where they have had their home since 2006, and they have two daughters and two grandsons. John offered advice for any other would-be authors who might be hesitant to put pen to paper.

'Do it! It's very therapeutic,' he said. 'If there's a story in you it will find its way out. At first it will seem daunting and difficult to get the words out, whether you type, dictate or handwrite, but persevere – one word at a time.

'However, writing and publishing are two different tasks. The first is liberating; the second can be extremely frustrating and lead to despair. Don't let it. Today, through the miracles of technology, anyone can publish their work.

'Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) is fairly straightforward if you can produce the text in the right format,' he said.

'I spent several years trying the traditional route – proposal to a literary agent, slush pile, publisher, finance director say no – rinse and repeat. Before you produce something for an agent it is best to have it professionally edited and certainly proof-read.

'All agents ask for a proposal letter and the first three chapters at least. They also demand a synopsis, which is not to be confused with the blurb, and this is fiendishly difficult. If you get to the acceptance stage your publisher will take over and seize control but still expect you to take an active part in promotions.

'I've even been approached by film production companies wanting to option my novels. One of these progressed well until the first major hurdle.

'These individuals normally demand in excess of £50,000 as a fee. One of my grandsons wants to be a screenwriter – I'm not discouraging him.'

● The Jack Renouf series is available from Amazon, where the books are attracting top-star reviews and, as with all the novels, loan copies are available from the Jersey Library.

Competition

■ The author has offered three copies of *Under The Tide* to be won in a competition. To win one of them, simply enter the competition by visiting his website at johnfhanley.co.uk/contact and the first three readers to email will receive a signed copy of *Under The Tide* through the post



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