

Hugely successful—but never complacent

With 61 bestsellers on her résumé, Sandra Brown still feels that the more she writes, the more she needs to learn

By Glenn Hunter

If hard work, longevity and huge book sales are good measures of writing success, Sandra Brown must be considered one of America's most successful authors. Over a career spanning 31 years, the Texas-based writer has penned more than 75 suspense-thriller and romance novels, 61 of them *New York Times* bestsellers.

With about 80 million books in print worldwide, Brown also has had her novels made into television movies (*French Silk*, *Smoke Screen*, *Ricochet*) and hosted true-crime TV documentaries (*Hardcover Mysteries*, *Murder by the Book*). She hasn't lacked for an annual book contract since 1982 and, since 1990, has worked with her literary agent to hammer out three-year publishing deals calling for her to produce one hardcover, full-length novel every 12 months.

A trim, carefully spoken woman who's a dead ringer for actress Mary Tyler Moore, the one-time TV reporter began writing fiction on a dare from her husband, award-winning documentarian Michael Brown. While she always had a vivid style, a published writer advised her early on that she needed to learn more about plotting mechanics. So Brown bought four or five books and tackled the subject like a college course—a course she obviously passed.

She approaches her work today with the same strong work ethic. "I think if somebody says, 'Well, I've got a great story to tell,' that's great. But are you willing to put in the time and trouble and hard work to tell it in a way that people will want to read it?" Brown asks. "That kind of separates the sheep from the goats. You know, it's not just what you want, but what are you willing to give up in order to get it?"

You've been so prolific in your career, you must be thinking constantly about your next book project. Where do your ideas and inspiration come from?

Ideas for stories come from everywhere. Everywhere. I might see something and go, "That's interesting. That would be an interesting career to write about." Or I'll see little filler stories in the newspaper or on a broadcast and I'll go, "Hmmm, that's an interesting circumstance. How did people get in that circumstance?" And, sometimes I have no idea where an idea comes from. A character will just walk into my head and say, "Write about me."

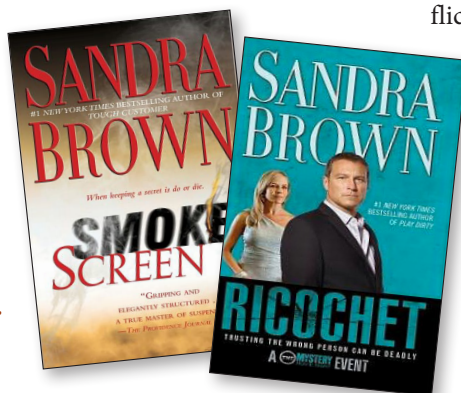
Is your approach similar each time you do a new novel?

When I'm working with an idea, there's a very definite moment when the idea becomes a story. Some ideas never do become stories, and I have to give them up. There is a little bubble of excitement I feel when the key element arrives, when I'm able to say, "That was the one plot element I needed to make it all work."

Then I prepare a 15- to 20-page synopsis for my editor, along with character sketches. The sketches are very sketchy, because I'd rather let the characters emerge gradually. My first draft is a get-acquainted exercise with my characters. By the end of the second draft, I know my characters real well. By the third or fourth draft, I've lived with them for a year. It's more exciting to let the character become what he or she wants to be.

At the beginning of the process, I know the initial conflict; I know several plot elements will make problems worse for the protagonist; I know how the problem will be resolved. But I don't do a paragraph-by-paragraph outline. The excitement, the

Both of these Sandra Brown novels were made into movies. Just as filmmakers do, Brown emphasizes a strong sense of scenes as she builds a story, with each one having a purpose.



thrill of writing, is coming to work each day and seeing what is going to happen. I know where I'm going, but I don't know how I'll get there. How it comes about just comes out.

My second draft is my crafting draft. That's where I take every single scene apart and write and rewrite and rewrite some more. Each scene has to have a purpose. Each scene has to move the story along. There has to be a conflict: Who wants what from whom, what happens if they don't get it, and why now? I got that from [the playwright] David Mamet. That keeps the scene vivid, and gives it purpose. This second draft, the extensive rewriting, takes me as long as the first one.

Then, in the third draft, I check on pacing and make sure all the holes are plugged. The fourth draft is the polishing draft.



Andrew Eccles

Brown knows what she's about, and minces no words: "I want to tell [readers] a hell of a good story, give them hours of good entertainment, and I make no apology for that."

That sounds very purposeful and complete. Do you receive much editing?

No, I don't. I send [my editor] the first draft, very apologetically, and it's like walking naked into a room. I get her notes back, so I can incorporate her suggestions about any problems she sees. Then all she does basically is copyedit the last draft.

Early in your career you were known as a romance novelist. Then you began writing thrillers or mysteries. Why and how did that transition come about?

At the peak of [the early period], I was doing six or seven romances a year. I started using pseudonyms, because I was writing them for various publishers. Of course, the romances were short, but I don't dismiss them or belittle them, because, no matter what you write, it's hard. I did it diligently and worked very, very hard. But I'm constantly challenging myself.

I think the worst thing anybody can do is just to settle in and say, "Well, this is as good as it's going to get, and I'm never going to strive for anything bigger." I mean, I think I would just become so bored and so, you know, kind of mentally fat and lazy if I just kept doing the same thing. I

also made the switch [to thrillers] because I wanted to expand my readership. I wanted to write books that men as well as women would want to read. The thrillers are very complex; they're much harder to write; they're much longer to write.

With each new book, I try to do something that I haven't done previously. I try to stretch, to do something that's going to keep me interested and, therefore, my reader interested.

A lot of writers are known for one thing. If they've been a pilot, they write about airplanes. If they've been a lawyer, they write about trials. If they've been a cop, they write about police procedure. If they've been a surgeon, they write about medicine. Well, I've been all over the map. I've thought that was kind of the job of a storyteller: to tell a different story every time. Now I have kind of a unique voice in the marketplace.

That is, you don't know what the hell she's going to write about. But, it's probably going

to be very Southern in orientation, it's going to have a secret that is not revealed until the end of the book, and it's going to be pretty fast-paced.

How do you handle research for your books?

The first and foremost thing is telling the story. So I worry about the story, the plot, what's going to happen, and I make myself a list of everything I need to know. OK, if you're driving from point A to point B, how long does it take? If you're walking, which corner would you take? How many prisoners are in the Big Spring [Texas] federal prison? What do they wear? What's their average day like? That's research I would have to do to drop in things that will make it authentic.

You want it to be real; you want it to smack of authenticity. But readers don't want to be bogged down with a bunch of facts and figures just showing off how smart you are. So I try to provide just enough information.

I go to most places. I didn't go to the prison; I did that online. My research assistant does some research for me because she's so good on the computer. She will spend

hours surfing all this stuff, and then I'll say, "Print out what you've learned about shrimp boats." But then, I'll go to Louisiana. Or I'll go to Jackson Hole [Wyoming] to find out something there about the airport. I don't want a reader saying, "Well, you've never been to the Jackson Hole airport because that's not the way it is."

Then it gets trickier. If I have to talk to a detective, then I will call the Austin police department, say, and ask, "Who is your public information officer?" Then we'll talk and I'll say, "Can I come see you, and then you show me through the crimes-against-persons unit? Can I talk to a detective there? An investigator?" If there's a scene there, I need to know the layout of the building. It's not my favorite part of it. My favorite part is the make-believe, by far.

Is your success to date a help or a hindrance as you approach each new book project?

It never feels like I'm successful. I'm scared to death every time I come in that door. Novice writers say, "Oh, my gosh, it's just getting that first book." Well, no, it isn't. It's getting that 75th book! Because the more I do it, the more I feel I need to learn, the better I wish I were. I never feel secure in what I've done, and I think it would be deadly if I did, because I think the worst mistake any creative person can do is feel complacent.

I think you ought to approach each project as, this is the one and only shot you're going to get. And it had better be good. After my first editor bought my first book, and I was getting all concerned about promotion and whether I should be doing this or that, she said, "The best thing you can do is write a good book, and it will be found. Don't busy yourself with all this other stuff. And when you get the world's attention, you better have something to say." I've always remembered that.

So I never feel like, I've achieved this, so now I can relax. Nor does the publisher! They don't say, "Last year your print run on this book was

With these and her many other novels, Brown starts writing with a sense of the initial conflict, some obstacles and a resolution, but not a detailed outline.

THE SANDRA BROWN FILE

- Sandra Brown, 64, lives in the Dallas-Fort Worth area with her husband, Michael Brown. She has one daughter, one son and four grandsons.
- Her son, Ryan Brown, also is a published fiction writer, whose titles include *Play Dead* and *Thawed Out & Fed Up*.
- Brown majored in English but never graduated from Fort Worth's Texas Christian University, dropping out instead to marry her husband. In 2008 TCU awarded her an honorary doctorate of humane letters. That same year she and her husband established the Sandra Brown Excellence in Literary Fiction Scholarship at TCU for aspiring fiction writers.
- She is the 2012 president of Mystery Writers of America.
- Her latest thriller, *Low Pressure*, is due out this month.

450,000 in hardcover. So this year we're going to cut back on that." They say, "If we sold this many last year, let's try to sell this many this year." The bar is never lowered; it's always raised. And reader expectations are always raised. As good or as bad as last year's book was, this one needs to be better.

Despite your sales and other accomplishments as a writer, it's unlikely your novels will be taught alongside Jane Austen or Ernest Hemingway in college lit classes. Does that ever bother you?

I can't let myself worry about that. I'd rather be read than sit on some college library shelf and collect dust and be required reading that nobody wants to read because it's boring. I want to be the book that's on the beach and on the subway train and in the bathtub with someone because that means they're having a good time, they're enjoying themselves. There are wonderful books that are so much more literary [than mine], and I respect that. But that's not what

I want to do, or set out to do. I want to tell [readers] a hell of a good story, give them hours of good entertainment, and I make no apology for that.

You would be amazed at the mail I get. How somebody is just now finding a simple little story that I wrote years ago and goes, "This spoke to me, because I experienced this in my life." Or, "I was going through a terrible time, and I just needed an escape, and your book got me through that time of my life." In Japan, I had readers coming up to me and just bursting into tears. Bringing me gifts, saying, "I love you. I love your books. They're my most prized possessions."

If I don't win a Pulitzer or the Nobel Prize, it will be all right, because I've had an excellent career. My reward is when people say, "I read your books before I go to sleep; you're the last person I say 'Goodnight' to every night." It's that kind of personal connection with the reader that really matters to me.

Glenn Hunter

Glenn Hunter is executive editor of *D CEO*, a business magazine in Dallas, and a freelance writer. His work has appeared in a number of publications including *The Journal of Country Music*, *Boston Phoenix* and *Los Angeles Times*.

