

'At least you can kill people in a book'

Award-winning novelist Joan Brady was enjoying her life as a writer in a sleepy Devon town - until she started being poisoned by fumes from the shoe factory next door. So began an eight-year struggle for justice - and her health. But then, she tells Stuart Jeffries her life has been far from uneventful ...

Stuart Jeffries
Tuesday January 29, 2008

Guardian

Joan Brady never did finish writing her novel *Cool Wind From the Future*. One day eight years ago, the first woman to win the Whitbread book of the year award looked up from the writing desk at her home and noticed something. The Elizabethan beam above her head was trembling. A nearby staircase was shaking. The noise was unbearable. It was the summer of 2000 and her new neighbours in the quiet Devon town of Totnes had set up a small factory next to her study. Victoria Wine had moved out and a firm called Conker had moved in. What had once been a wine store had become a shoemaking workshop.

If her new neighbours had only been noisy, Brady might have finished the book. It was the fumes from glues used in shoe manufacture wafting into her study from the workshop that made her give up. "The glues included chemicals that kids sniff to get high and which kill one child a week in the UK," she says. "They are glues that make workers in third-world sweatshops into paraplegics. The fumes were contaminating my house 24 hours a day." She abandoned the novel, and spent the next eight years fighting Conker, and the local council, in an extraordinary story of small-town life that pits one woman against the system and which quite frequently beggars belief.

The poisoning had an extreme impact on her health. "I really would have been in a wheelchair if I hadn't done something," she says. "I started to go numb in my legs. I could stick needles into my shins and feel nothing. I couldn't drive because my legs were so numb. I was terrified."

Doctors from the medical toxicology unit of Guy's Hospital in London later diagnosed that Brady was suffering from toxic peripheral neuropathy and also suspected that prolonged exposure to chemicals in the glues was very likely the cause of the nerve damage.

Brady's fears were compounded when she did an online search and found that Bill Bowerman, Nike's co-founder, was diagnosed with peripheral neuropathy after experimenting with glues in the development of trainers. "He wound up having to use leg braces. I thought: 'This could happen to me.'"

Last week, Brady, who is 68, accepted an out-of-court settlement from Conker. But her health is still affected, and doctors say she is unlikely ever to recover fully.

The episode is only the latest incident in a diverting, action-packed life. As a teenager in the US, Brady was a ballet dancer, first with the San Francisco Ballet and then in 1960 with George Balanchine's New York City Ballet. Her memoir, *The Unmaking of a Dancer* (published in the UK as *Prologue: An Unconventional Life*), details the diets of yoghurt and hard-boiled eggs, huge blood-filled blisters, and her admiration for Balanchine. But, aged only 21, she retired. Why? "My mind was turning to mush. So I enrolled at Columbia and took philosophy." The bookshelves in her Oxford living room (lots of well-thumbed, intimidating

physics books) disclose a woman whose mind has not been turned to mush, neither by ballet nor glue fumes.

Her personal life has been still more interesting; according to her memoir, she fell in love with her future husband when she was only three, even though he once had an affair with her mother. "When I was three," she says by way of clarification, "there were three choices of lover for me. There was my cousin. There was Robert Oppenheimer [the theoretical physicist known as the father of the atomic bomb for his work on the Manhattan Project and a great friend of Joan's parents, both brilliant Berkeley economists]. Or Dexter." Dexter Masters was a novelist who, in 1955, had written an anti-nuclear novel, *The Accident*. Before she married Joan's father, her mother herself had had an affair with Dexter and even contemplated spending her declining years with him. Instead, Joan, by now 21, comforted Dexter, 30-odd years older, after the death of his first wife, and her youthful charms proved seductive. Either she knows how to tell a good story about herself, or Joan Brady is not very aware about how strange this story sounds.

In 1963, she married Dexter. Did the marriage alienate her mother? "Oh, it was hard for her - after all, I was his junior by three decades. When I was 21 I was a slight little thing, and I looked 14. A mother would have been upset, setting aside her own feelings for him." Nor, she suggests, was it easy for Dexter: "If you have a pretty young thing adoring you, it's not altogether easy." In 1965, the couple left the States. They had a baby son, Alexander, who himself would later become an award-winning writer (Alexander Masters' biography of a psychopathic homeless man, *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, won the Guardian first book award in 2005). Eventually, the family came to England, settling in Devon. Why? "He was going to write and I was going to adore him." Did she? "Yes, I adored him. I thought of him as a great writer. But only after his death, I kind of realised he had had one book in him and he had written it before we came here."

Ultimately, Brady rather than her husband would become the feted writer. She had already published her first novel, *The Imposter*, and her memoir of her dancing years, but it was her third book which made her name. *Theory of War*, a richly textured historical novel drawn from the story of her own grandfather, Alexander Brady, a white child who was sold into slavery after the American civil war, won the Whitbread award (now sponsored by Costa) in 1993.

"Dexter read the manuscript of *Theory of War* and changed it. You see, I think he loved me very much towards the end, if not at the beginning, and he didn't want people to think badly of me, so he cut all the modern sections, thinking they would embarrass me." He did not live long enough to see her win the Whitbread: Dexter died in 1989, aged 80, from a degenerative illness. Whatever else her beloved husband's death did, it gave her literary autonomy: "After he died I put all the modern sections back. Without them the book wouldn't have worked. Without them it loses its driving force."

She has lived on her own ever since and believes that this has something to do with the nature of what happened to her during her legal ordeal. "I think they thought they could get away with it because I was a woman living on my own," she says. "I have never been cornered before and, in that sense, it was an interesting experience."

Brady finally convinced her local council's environmental health officers to do tests on her house. Concentrations of 600 parts per million of butanone were drifting into her home: the safe limit for household exposure is two parts per million. "They thought that the readings were so off the scale there was something wrong with their equipment," says Brady. "But there wasn't. Volatile organic compounds were coming into my house. They included n-hexane, butanone and toluene - all of them are hazardous to the health of people exposed to them on their own, but they are more toxic when combined. And all these vapours are heavier than air, so they rolled down into my house."

Black dust settled on her books, files and desk. She abandoned her study, which was the nearest room to the workshop, stuffing towels around its door to keep the smell and dust out

of the rest of the house. "It only partially worked - I could still smell the fumes in other rooms." How could she work? "Eventually I couldn't."

Conker describes itself as a family-friendly business offering bespoke shoemaking services. "We make all the shoes ourselves behind our shop ... using the finest-quality materials and traditional cordwaining techniques," says the firm's website, www.conkershoes.com, where you can consult its range of hippyish footwear.

Last week, Brady, 68, accepted an out-of-court settlement of £115,000 from Conker. The shoemaking firm says it is disappointed that its insurers chose to settle and claims that no damage was caused by its solvents. The award ended Brady's eight-year struggle not only with the shoemaker but also with the local council which, far from helping the writer stop poisonous fumes wafting into her home, issued 15 court summonses against her because she built a wall on a listed building to keep the noise and fumes at bay.

The legal wrangling may be over, but Brady is left with dead nerves, heightened allergies and a rage against the legal system and local democracy. On the plus side, she also has a lucrative new career: a few years after abandoning *Cool Wind From the Future*, she channelled her rage over the dispute into writing a new book, a thriller called *Bleedout*, which has become an international bestseller.

"I wanted to line these people up against the wall and machine gun them. Magistrates, environmental health officers, lawyers, shoemakers, everybody," says Brady, sipping wine over lunch at a brasserie in Oxford. Friendly, bespectacled and seemingly placid, Brady is the last person you'd expect to fantasise about being a mass killer. "It's amazing how violent your imagination gets. I'd never been that angry before." So why the thriller? "At least you can kill people in a book," she says, slicing her gruyere tart.

Since Brady received the settlement, several newspapers have suggested that the toxic fumes compelled to abandon her highbrow fiction and "reduced" her to writing thrillers. Before I met Brady, I was ready to take her to task for the barmy notion that writing thrillers was in any sense less mentally demanding than writing literary fiction.

Now the poor dope - or so the story went - was only capable of pulp fiction. The Times ran with the headline "Fumes made me go lowbrow, says writer". It even juxtaposed two extracts - one from *Theory of War*, the other ostensibly the opening paragraph of *Bleedout* (it is actually from later in the book) under the headline "Dumbing down" - as if to suggest the fumes had made Brady a literary thickie. "The voice is exactly the same as in *Theory of War*," she counters crossly. "I haven't dumbed down. I never said it. That's the pure invention of the Times. They have decided that this effete literary woman has become so stupid that she can no longer write boring literary fiction and writes poorly selling thrillers instead. My mental faculties haven't deteriorated. And anyway, what an insult it would be to thriller writers to suggest that you need to be stupid to write them. It seems to me so irritating that you would denigrate a remarkable genre where much of the best writing is done. I'm a great admirer of writers like John Grisham and Scott Turow."

Bleedout has been a great success since it was published in 2005 - UK sales alone are in excess of 50,000. Six foreign-language editions have been published and 50,000 copies have been printed for a US edition. Last week, her publishers received the manuscript for *Bleedout*'s sequel. "They tell me they like it," she says, pleased. But she came to the genre only because she was as angry as hell. What inspired her was "the idea that you see a poor woman on her own and so you can push her around. That's maddening if you're the victim. And I was."

Bleedout's central character is a victim-turned-abuser, a man whose uncaring blood family and neglectful institutional carers push him into crime, jail and (possibly) murder. "What I went through made me understand why someone in jail is violent." It's about powerlessness. "You are in a very unjust situation and there's apparently nothing you can do."

Significantly, her hero is banged up in South Hams State Prison, a US jail, but named after her loathed council. "If we get right to the heart of things," she writes in an Author's Note in *Bleedout*, "the South Hams district council is responsible for the existence of this book. Their relentless pursuit of me through the courts took on an almost messianic quality and focused my attention as never before on issues of justice and injustice."

Why the bile? "I was fearful of becoming paralysed and the council takes me to court - that's why. I made 15 court appearances and the threat was always there that I would wind up doing two years in Holloway."

The council charged that Brady had done unauthorised work to a listed building in removing a wooden staircase at the back of her property and building a wall to insulate herself from the workshop. "One morning, an enforcement officer called and said that charges were going to be brought against me. I'd never had a parking ticket let alone been in court before, so this was frightful - particularly when I was still being poisoned. The first court appearance was horrifying. I hadn't realised in this country that you're guilty until proved innocent. But I was told to disclose my financial details so they could set my fine. This is before I'd entered a plea! The whole experience was about humiliation. That's how I got into the mindset of the hate-filled felon in *Bleedout*."

"Robespierre said: 'Bring me the greatest patriot in France and get him to write six lines on any subject and I will find something in them to hang him.' When you get entangled with the law, that's how you feel - they'll get you whatever the truth."

But they didn't. Brady was awarded £4,000 by South Hams council after an investigation by the Local Government Ombudsman found it guilty of maladministration. "My friends and family said: 'Give it up and say you're guilty.' The thing would have gone away. But I decided not to - I was the victim, and I finally proved it, with the great help of some terrific lawyers."

The court battle continued for several more years. "I was repeatedly offered money by Conker's insurers, but they came with the proviso that I accepted a caution [for the offence of building an illegal wall]. I just refused to accept that - and I had done nothing wrong." Only when that proviso was removed did Brady accept the out-of-court settlement.

How is her health now? "It's hard to describe, but it's like wearing silk socks all the time - the tones of the sensations are slightly muffled." She brushes her hand over the slightly textured tablecloth. "I can't really feel that texture." But she can walk and drive? "I can."

Better yet, she writes now in relative peace; three years ago she sold up and moved from Totnes to Oxford. Later, she shows me her study; it features a vaulted sunroof with complicated blinds to control the light. Across the street, true, they're building a huge development of flats, but otherwise it's a writer's haven. She doesn't know who lives in her old house now.

Why did she stay in Totnes for so long? "I'd been there 30 years and I thought the wall would keep the fumes away. I was naive, but everybody is when it comes to their personal health." When she eventually moved, "I felt that the council had it in for me, and I needed to get away from them and the town. It had made me boring - when I saw friends at dinner parties I'd tell them about synergistic chemicals and listed-buildings regulations and their eyes would roll."

She has had great success in her career: *Theory of War* earned Brady critical comparisons with William Golding, Angela Carter, Jack London and John Steinbeck. Can she imagine returning to her unfinished literary novel? "Maybe," says Brady. "But I'm really enjoying writing thrillers." *Bleedout's* cover is emblazoned with the *Mirror* quote "Brilliant ... Move over John Grisham." Perhaps she should send letters of thanks to the shoemaker and the council for making this lucrative career move possible? "Somehow," says Brady wryly, "I don't think so."