

Joan Brady:

Anger management

Joan Brady's recent courtroom battles have inspired her to write a legal thriller. This granddaughter of a white slave tells Christie Hickman what fuels her rage

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In September 2001, when Joan Brady should have been making her first appearance at Totnes Magistrates Court, she was in Tromsø, Norway, representing Britain at an international conference to celebrate the centenary of the Nobel Peace Prize. The theme was War and Peace, and Brady's lecture was on sources of hatred in war. She proudly shared a stage with the great Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko. 'Not only that,' she says in a soft, modulated voice which, after half a lifetime in England, still bears traces of her origins on the east and west American coasts, 'but I ended the evening in a pub reading his poetry for him'.

Brady's speech could not have been more apposite. She won the 1993 Whitbread Book of the Year award for her second novel, *Theory of War*, based on the story of her own grandfather, Alexander Brady, who, as a white child, was sold into slavery at the end of the American Civil War. Hatred, she says, was the glue that held the story together.

But hatred of a different kind was about to make her own life hell for three years. Brady had been living in the quiet Devon town of Totnes for over 30 years when, in 2000, South Hams District Council granted planning permission for a small shoe factory in a building adjoining her house.

Apart from the noise, she thinks the fumes from the chemical adhesives were so toxic that they affected her health, and when she protested, the council found a reason to indict her instead. She fought back and over the next two years attended court 15 times. Unable to concentrate on anything much except the legal battle, she abandoned the literary novel she was writing and poured her fury into a tense and ingenious legal thriller called *Bleedout* (Simon & Schuster, pounds 12.99).

Issues of justice, betrayal and revenge resonate through Brady's work, but even though this is her fifth novel, it is her first entry into territory that writers

like Grisham and Turow have made their own. The setting is Springfield, Illinois, and the two central characters are Hugh Freyl, a murdered blind lawyer, who narrates his story from the grave, and his protege, David Marion, a young convicted killer whose release from prison Freyl has orchestrated. As the novel opens, he stands accused of Freyl's murder. Marion finds himself caught up in political corruption and an intricate financial conspiracy.

David Marion, we learn, was an abused child. Rebellion and punishment followed, fuelling a residual anger that only revenge will appease. This same cycle of abuse and rage informed the character of Jonathan Carrick, the white slave boy in *Theory of War*. And while Brady concedes that South Hams council and the violence of her own feelings were partly responsible for *Bleedout*, the emotional legacy of her grandfather's slavery has cast a long shadow across subsequent generations.

Her father was one of Brady's seven children, and one of four who killed themselves. Her sister, she says, 'gets very angry and shows her anger. When she read *Theory of War*, she went to see a therapist, who told her that she had exactly the same sort of angry frustrations that children of alcoholics show.' The difference, as Brady points out, is that their father was the son of a slave.

Brady claims not to be an overtly angry person ('except when cornered') but anger is the force that links her books and gives her male characters such power and resilience. 'I do seem to do well with angry men for some reason,' she says. 'I don't understand why people denigrate anger. I don't think you can really survive in a world like this without it.'

Off the page, it has empowered her with a core of strength and resolve not immediately apparent beneath her good-humoured charm. Nor is she given to self-pity or sentimentality. She is a slight, grey-haired, elegant woman, who dresses in various shades of black, and lives now in Oxford where, for the moment, she rents a small neat house near the river.

Brady has led an extraordinary life. She was born in San Francisco, and brought up in Berkeley where her father was a blacklisted economics professor. Her mother was a brilliant consumer economist and both parents were writers. It was an unstable marriage and Brady, against parental opposition, became a dancer, first with the San Francisco Ballet and then, in 1960, with George Balanchine's New York City Ballet. At 21, she gave it all up to study philosophy at Columbia, and in 1963 married the writer Dexter Masters, with whom she says she fell in love at the age of three.

Masters had written the anti-nuclear novel *The Accident* in 1955, and had been her mother's lover before their marriages. He became a family friend, earmarked by Brady's mother as the 'husband of her old age'. But when

Masters's wife died, it was Joan who comforted and won him. There were 32 years between them. Her mother never forgave her.

Their son, Alexander, was born in 1965, the year they decided to leave the US for England. There was a brief return to dancing and then, with Masters's encouragement, she began writing. She published her first novel, *The Imposter*, in 1979, and in 1982 a startling memoir about her dancing years, *The Unmaking of a Dancer* (published here as *Prologue*).

Masters died in 1989 from a degenerative illness. Brady nursed him single-handedly before taking him to America, hoping for a miracle cure. It was a mistake and, to add to the disillusionment, she had to battle against the indifference of US nursing homes " or 'dying rooms' as she calls them, with good reason.

Masters had been born in Springfield, and is buried there in a cemetery that Brady uses as the last resting place for Freyl in *Bleedout*. Small wonder that Brady holds no affection for Springfield. 'It's my version of hell, that town. I feared the place the first time I went there, not just because it held an 82-year old mother-in-law and a somewhat hostile family, but there is something rather violent beneath the surface.'

Back in England, she tried to write a factual expose about the American way of death, 'until it became obvious that the world was not waiting for this revelation on either side of the Atlantic, and then, fuelled by rage and frustration, I channelled it all into *Theory of War*.'

Masters had seen *Theory of War* before he died, and persuaded her to cut all the modern references, 'because he thought it was unpleasant. But after he died, I stuck it all back. I think he was a bit over-protective about me. He didn't want me to perhaps appear too harsh, whereas it seems to me, the harsher I am, the better it works.' Harsh in what sense, I ask. 'Raw, perhaps.' She tells me that when *The Imposter* was published, one reviewer remarked that 'If we can get Joan Brady to unclench her jaws, we might have something'.

'And it was true,' she says, laughing. 'It was exactly what Balanchine said about the dancers that came from San Francisco to New York. That it wasn't until you knew the technique solidly enough to throw it away that you could actually dance.' When did she finally unclench her jaws? 'When Dexter died,' she says unflinchingly, 'because I got mad'.

She wrote about his death in a novel called *Death Comes For Peter Pan*, and when that was done, she unclenched her jaws further in a wonderful flight of fancy called *The Emigre*, in which anger, finally, took a back seat.

Much of the impact of Brady's writing comes from her skilful balancing of the personal with the political. Though she says she never thinks of herself as a

political writer, her books are evidence to the contrary. She has always been intrigued by the paranoia of the McCarthy years, which blighted the careers of both her father and her husband. Her inspiration for the blind lawyer in *Bleedout* was Alger Hiss, a friend of Masters, and an early victim of McCarthyism.

Hiss and Brady never liked each other, but she wants to write a book about him. 'I never for a moment thought he was guilty,' she says. 'He fought his entire life long and it destroyed his career. It was so obviously a set-up job. But he was a fascinating character, and what a great story it would make.'