

An Interview with Mary Ward Brown

James Thomas

James Thomas is a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Auburn University where he is currently finishing his MA in English. He came to Auburn to study literature after working for several years in the defense contractor industry. His motivation for a career change was ignited by an uncontrollable desire to read and write fiction. He is currently at work on his first novel.

Most people would believe that 60 years old is a little too old for someone to seriously contemplate a writing career, but that is just what Mary Ward Brown has done. The story behind Brown's writing career is unique and, the best part of all, full of love. My original desire to interview Brown was based on her being a Southern writer, but, after learning her story, I soon realized there was much more to learn from her than her Southern background.

Mary Ward Brown graduated from Judson College, a Baptist women's college near her hometown of Hamburg, Alabama, with a degree in English. After graduation she accepted the job of publicity director at the college, and while attending a conference, she met Kirtley Brown, the publicity director for Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn

University), and not long after they were married. She quit her job at Judson and moved to Auburn where they lived for seven years and where she gave birth to her son Kirtley. The family moved to Hamburg when her father died and left her the family farm. During this time she began to write and had a few short stories published, but she soon quit when she found herself torn between writing and taking care of her family. Her love for her family was top priority, and she decided that her life with them was more important than sitting closed up in a room for several hours trying to write fiction.

After her son was grown and her husband had died—25 years after she had stopped writing—Brown decided to try writing again. Although some people might find fault in her decision to give up her writing and take care of her family and farm, she has never regretted her complete devotion to her family. In addition, Brown's love for writing never died. Her writing career reveals the love that every writer must possess in order to seriously pursue writing as a craft. Writers do not make the decision to write fiction as though they are making a decision to be an accountant; writers write because they love to write, regardless of their age and circumstances.

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I interviewed Brown in January, 1989, at the Auburn University Hotel and Conference Center, where she had been invited to read one of her stories during the Read Alabama! conference. She has received many such invitations since her first collection of short stories, *Tongues of Flame*, was published in 1986. This collection, which according to *Publishers Weekly* depicts "timeless emotions such as suffering, loss, and joy with a light, sure hand," received the Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for 1987. She seemed to be sincerely surprised with all of the praise she has received and was happy to answer any questions I had concerning writing. She was polite, kind, warm, and straightforward in her answers, and projected an intense, energetic look with her eyes as she was listening and talking.

Interviewer: Let's start off with the basic questions asked of a writer. What made you want to write? Where did you get the desire to write?

Brown: That would be hard to say. People have written books on the creative instinct and it's just there in some people, much more pronounced in some people than others.

Interviewer: Did you always have the desire to write or to express yourself in some way?

Brown: Yes, as a child I tried to write poems. They were very small poems, and I didn't know what I was doing. I wanted to do something; I just didn't know what. Even all the years I was just keeping house I wanted to make the flowers pretty; I wanted to make the meals nice. I wanted to make a room look good; I wanted it to be comfortable and

beautiful with the means I had.

Interviewer: That's an interesting part of your life I would like to explore. You were writing and then you quit for 25 years. Why?

Brown: What happened was that I had a sister-in-law who was writing short stories and having them published for *McCall's* and *Redbook* and all those, and she loaned me some books on narrative technique. That kind of got me off dead center. I would start these stories, I would have these great beginnings and I wouldn't know how to go ahead. I read those books and continued to read fiction, and finally all of these things began to soak in that you needed to know to write narrative. It's just like playing the piano. Unless you know a little bit about harmony or can at least read music, you just can't play. Of course there are people who can play by ear and there are those I believe who can write by ear. Anyway, I finally wrote a story all of the way through and I didn't know what to do with it. I sent that story to someone who advertised as an agent, which is something you are not supposed to do. Anyway, this person wrote me a very complimentary and encouraging letter. Well, it was all a fraud. I mean legitimate agents don't advertise. But it was in the *Atlantic Monthly* and I thought it would be alright. But the main thing is that I had written a story and I began to write more.

Finally, I decided to go to the University of Alabama, which is not far from where we lived and [where] I still [live], and take Hudson Strode's creative writing class. I sent off a couple of stories to the University and they said I couldn't be in Hudson Strode's class, that I had to be in John Craig Stewart's

class first. My husband was a wonderful male chauvinist; he really trust my driving to go to work and was terribly worried when I went to go. He decided that he would come to Tuscaloosa once a week to attend the class. They said I could come once a week. But this one day he killed him because he would be at the farm and then drive to Tuscaloosa at night and work at the library, which was real hard thing for him. He loved a college campus and a college library.

Anyway, what I was getting at was that I could not, in the things I read, comprehend what "theme" was. I don't know why I had just written what I could not understand what was by theme. Finally, in that class it dawned on me. I knew that I had to have a theme or your story would hold together, but I couldn't figure out what was meant by theme. I understood theme, I could write a short story. I could verbalize the theme in a sentence. I knew it had to stay on this

However, nobody that I knew was interested in writing fiction out there in the country. In fact, nobody that I knew even read fiction. So I read somewhere that you could take a creative writing course through correspondence at the University of North Carolina. So I signed up with Charles Edward Eaton, my teacher. First, they put me in a regular short story class. I had to study all these short stories and answer questions and write essays. I didn't want to do that; I didn't have time. I just wanted to write stories and have them criticized. They let me do that. I would write these stories and send them

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Edward Eaton.

He was the one that said you have to
try the quarterlies. So I started to send
the stories out to the literary quarterlies.
He suggested the *University of Kansas*
Review, which was very good at the time.
So they took one, and then they took
another. I started to get stories
published in several quarterlies, but I
wasn't making any money and we were
having a hard time on the farm.

My husband had never lived on a
farm, much less run a farm, and we had
a fairly good size operation, about 3,000
acres. Here I was upstairs with the
room shut trying to write fiction. My
husband had given up a good job at
Auburn to come over and run the farm
that I had inherited. I just couldn't do
that. Though for about four or five
years I did just that: write when my son
went off to school in the morning. The
older my son became, the more I
realized that he needed more attention.
He was getting to be a teenager and I
wanted to bring people home and I
would say, "I can't do that, I'm trying to
finish this story." So finally I quit. I'll
never forget the day. I was trying to
finish a story and he had brought two
boys home for lunch. I was trying to fix
lunch and finish the story, and I thought,
"I'm not going to do this anymore. This
is just running me crazy."

I was just torn apart. Because if you
do good work, at least for me, it takes
the first fruits of your energy—mental,
emotional, everything. So I just stopped,
and I'm not sorry. I really don't regret it
because I'll never write anything as good
as my living son, who would leave his
office and bring me over here. Then my
husband died 20 years ago and I would
have had terrible regrets if I hadn't tried
to do the best I could. Then my time

came. I was alone in the country. I remember somebody saying, "Well, what are you going to do? You can't live out there by yourself!" Well, I didn't know what I was going to do. I lived there all my life, except for the seven years I lived in Auburn. But during those years I had gotten an agent, though I was not really writing a great deal. So I really began to write at this time.

Interviewer: It sounds like you were encouraged. People told you that you had talent. Is that true?

Brown: I was always encouraged. I was always greatly encouraged.

Interviewer: No one told you, "Well, I don't think you should be writing?"

Brown: No, everybody said, "You should be writing." This agent that I had in New York with a good agency wrote a book himself; it's called *A Hill*. He was a conscientious objector during World War II and he did alternate service in a mental institution, which is what the book is about. My roommate at Judson had schizophrenia and her illness was devastating. Well, I wanted to know what her life was like in an institution. So I read that book. I thought that this was a good writer; his name was Victor Chapin. So I wrote him a letter and told him that I thought he was a wonderful writer and that I was sorry that his book didn't sell better. He wrote back and said that he was a reader for an agent. I had told him in the letter that I had tried to write short stories and he said that he could tell in the letter that I could write. So they took me in and all of a sudden I had an agent.

Interviewer: What advice would you tell an aspiring writer? Do you believe in creative writing courses? Do you believe that they help?

Brown: Yes, I think that they do help. First, you need to read. I read and write every day that I don't do something like this or play with my grandchildren.

Interviewer: What is your usual routine?

Brown: Whenever I wake up, usually about 4:00 in the morning, I drink some coffee and have a couple of pieces of toast, then I get back in bed and start to work in longhand. You can really concentrate early in the morning. I work for two or three hours, then you can't do it anymore. I then get up, fool around, get my clothes on, wash my face. Then I type what I've written, but I write very slowly, a bleeder it's called. Every morning I start at the beginning and I pay a lot of attention to style. My own style.

Interviewer: Then you're not a writer who writes, goes back, and continuously edits the work?

Brown: I edit from the beginning. I have to have everything right as I go along. Whenever I read over the work the next morning, I try to get the work right. But I don't do it all at once. In one reading I'll just keep reading it over and over. I'll see that that's not exactly the way it was or that it is not exactly what he would have said. I spend a lot of time of dialogue. Speech is wonderful, but you and I, the way we are talking, would be boring in fiction. You have to cut it down to the essence. Then you have to get the true essence, which is a different thing. But this is really a matter of style.

Interviewer: Your characters have a reason. There really isn't a reason between your characters. For example, in "The Barbecue," when the storekeeper talks, there is a reason. There is no waste; there is a reason for his saying what he is saying. Whatever he says helps the story.

Brown: Well, there is always a truth in dialogue. In another story there is a Dr. Dobbs who dines next to this girl and says, "I could help you." But then you think what he would say next was something true he would have taken me days; then it dawned on me. That kind of thing is what I'm thinking about.

Interviewer: When you're writing a story do you already have an idea as to what the story is about or do you create as you write?

Brown: A little of both.

Interviewer: Do you feel that writing has a purpose for helping society? What I'm referring to is racial relations in your stories. You're commenting on the injustice, but it seems as though you're preaching to the choir. You don't think you preach to the choir, but it seems as though you're making a point with it. The children in "Fruit of the Seed" are aware of the situation of their parents and they react to it. Do you comment on society with your writing?

Brown: No, I try not to preach. I don't want to. Fiction is a way of life for that kind of thing. I'm not trying to tell the truth about what I try to picture the way things were at the time. I just try to

Interviewer: Your characters talk for a reason. There really isn't any chatter between your characters. For instance, in "The Barbecue," when the storekeeper talks, there is a reason. There is no waste; there is a reason for his saying what he is saying. Whatever he says helps the purpose of the story.

Brown: Well, there is also a fictional truth in dialogue. In another story there is a Dr. Dobbs who drives up next to this girl and says, "I wish I could help you." But then I couldn't think what he would say next. There was something true he would say. It took me days; then it dawned on me. That kind of thing is what I'm talking about.

Interviewer: When you begin writing a story do you already have an idea as to what the story is going to be, or do you create as you write?

Brown: A little of both.

Interviewer: Do you feel like fiction has a purpose for helping to change society? What I'm referring to are the racial relations in your stories. I get the feeling from your stories that you are commenting on the injustice. I don't think you preach to the reader, but it seems as though you do try to make a point with it. The black children in "Fruit of the Season" are aware of the situation of their mother and they react to it. Do you try to comment on society with your writing?

Brown: No, I try not to. I mean I don't want to. Fiction is not a vehicle for that kind of thing. I'm just trying to tell the truth about what I see. I just try to picture the way things are or were at the time. I just try to make it

as true as possible because I don't know what is right. I don't see myself on one side or the other. I'm just looking. Someone once asked me, "Why do you always write about race and religion?" Well, that's all there is. Those are the main two subjects in the South.

Interviewer: Do your characters come from real people that you know? Do the situations come from real situations?

Brown: The situations tend to come from real situations.

Interviewer: Do you write to a certain audience?

Brown: No, I'm writing to tell the truth.

Interviewer: What is the spark that makes you want to sit down and write a particular story?

Brown: Something that somebody says or something that you see, or something that you hear, or something that you think of just sticks in your mind. Then you start from that.

That story "New Dresses" is from when a friend of mine told me that her daughter-in-law had cancer and that the daughter-in-law told her family that she wanted to buy a pretty dress, but nothing was said about why she was going or why she wanted the dress. When she bought the dress that she picked out, she said, "Well, let's get another one." So they bought her another one. My friend said that she could hardly think about it without crying. I just kept thinking about it and that's the way my story came about.

Interviewer: It seems that more people are writing in the short story

form now. Do you believe there is a resurgence of the short story form?

Brown: I think to a certain degree there is. One reason is that novels take such a long commitment. It takes me hours, sometimes two or three days to read a novel. On the other hand, you can read a short story in 25 to 30 minutes.

Interviewer: Why do you choose to write in the short story form?

Brown: I don't really think that the writer really chooses. I think that it comes naturally what you do. Like poets, for instance, they just think in those terms. Of course, you have to learn the craft of what you're doing. Some people write to go on and on, but I don't.

Interviewer: Have you ever tried to write a novel?

Brown: No, I don't want to. I think that short story writers are born, not made.

Interviewer: Do you think that the short story form is better than other forms of writing?

Brown: No, I don't think that it is better; it is just what I like to do.

Interviewer: Are you surprised at the amount of attention you have received?

Brown: Yes, I really am.

Interviewer: Do you enjoy attending these types of functions?

Brown: I enjoy everything but the performance. After I got going I did fine in my reading, but I dreaded it. I

really dread it; it makes me so nervous to get up in front of people. I woke up at 4:00 the last few mornings worrying about the reading. I have visions of getting up there and falling flat on my face.

Interviewer: The South has a strong tradition of good writers, such as Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner. Why do you think this tradition is so strong?

Brown: I don't know. That old thing about the tradition of storytellers is always mentioned, but you know, my family never told stories.

Interviewer: Do you think it has anything to do with the Southern sensitivity?

Brown: I really don't have any ideas about that. I know one thing, a lot of writers don't want to be branded as Southern writers because they're afraid of being thought of as regional writers. But I love being a Southern writer because I like the South.

Interviewer: Who are your favorite Southern writers?

Brown: William Faulkner was a great writer. I think that Flannery O'Connor, in her own way, is as great. No, no, that's not true. She doesn't have the scope. But I think that she was a great Southern writer.

Interviewer: What do you think of Truman Capote?

Brown: I think *In Cold Blood* is wonderful and it broke some new ground. A lot of people have followed him since then, like Norman Mailer. I like "A Christmas Memory," but I don't

think that Truman Capote is with Faulkner and Flannery

Interviewer: Why do you think people like to read about the

Brown: I don't think people read about the South any more in any other place. If a writer then people want to read him. Barry Hannah is a good Southern writer. He's gone kind of crazy like his craziness. It was not in *Hey Jack*. It was good. Barry Hannah, but no way could he write a good novel. Padgett Powell is a good Southern writer. I think he was a great writer, but I don't. I don't like writers who try to be funny. If what's in the story is like sex, I like it, but Mark Twain trying to be funny too much. Of course, you just can't like it.

Interviewer: One of the things for a writer is that you should instead of tell. Do you believe

Brown: Straight narrative is more effective if you show more than tell. You should make little vivid little scenes. It's hard for the reader. But that doesn't mean the best way to write. So you can go on and on with straight narrative; Faulkner does it very good. You have to be able to do that. Like that. I've listened and liked what she said that meditation place.

Interviewer: As I read more of stories, I kept thinking of such good Southern tales from these places, these people. True for me as a Southern

think that Truman Capote is up there with Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor.

Interviewer: Why do you think people like to read about the South?

Brown: I don't think people want to read about the South any more than any other place. If a writer is good, then people want to read him. I think Barry Hannah is a good Southern writer. He's gone kind of crazy, but I like his craziness. It was not successful in *Hey Jack*. It was good Barry Hannah, but no way could it be called a good novel. Padgett Powell was a good Southern writer. I think Twain was a great writer, but I don't like him. I don't like writers who try to be funny. If what's in the story is funny, like sex, I like it, but Mark Twain was trying to be funny too much. Of course, you just can't like everybody.

Interviewer: One of the golden rules for a writer is that you should show instead of tell. Do you believe in that?

Brown: Straight narrative is hard to keep somebody's attention with. It's more effective if you show instead of tell. You should make little scenes, vivid little scenes. It's harder to show the reader. But that doesn't mean it's the best way to write. Some writers can go on and on with straight narrative; Faulkner does it and he's so good. You have to be absolutely first rate to do that. Like that first woman who read today [Elly Welt], I really listened and liked what she said about that meditation place.

Interviewer: As I read your collection of stories, I kept thinking that these are such good Southern tales. I know these places, these people; it really rang true for me as a Southerner. But then

when I listened to you read that story today, I didn't get the feeling of a Southern tale. I thought, "This is just real people, real human beings." Do you think that rings true with your stories?

Brown: Yes, I wish they were all like that. If they're not, then they are failures. I think only time tells if you have failed or if you have succeeded. I collect books. I go to garage sales, Goodwill looking for books. You can buy these books for 50 cents, but most of them are so bad that the people who wrote them were really just wasting their time. I am always wondering if my book will be here in two or three years. But I'll say this: a text doesn't have to have an author with it to be effective. The writing should do that for itself. Chekhov's stories do not have to have Chekhov to make his stories good. The story should stand on its own without a reader, except you the reader. My stories should not have to have me reading them to an audience for them to be good.

Interviewer: Does all this attention you're getting affect how you write?

Brown: No, no, it doesn't. All I think about when I sit down to write is the story itself. When I go home, all this will be behind me and I'll just hope I can get past the first paragraph in the new story. I also hope my last story, the one the *New Yorker* rejected, will be published.

Interviewer: Do you get a lot of rejections?

Brown: I don't anymore. The *New Yorker* always rejects my stories. They're never going to publish one of my stories. I just don't write their kind of story. I'm not discouraged by it. I really don't like

what they publish. Their stories just aren't real to me. You'll begin reading one and you'll think, "I don't care anything about these people."

Interviewer: Do you think that a person can write good literature and still have it sell?

Brown: Some people do; it's just hard. J.F. Powers writes about Roman Catholic priests and he has written a book that is doing very well, and he's a first-rate writer.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the praise you have received from the scholars?

Brown: I really don't know what to make of it. People who don't read much, say "I love your book." I think that I've just written a popular book.

Interviewer: But isn't that good?

Brown: Yes, but usually only a reader who is a trained reader reads literature. These people just read for entertainment. So I don't know what to think. People at home just love that book.

Interviewer: But Dickens was very popular in his time.

Brown: Yes, but he's not the greatest literary artist in the world. He's a great writer. But I really try to make art. I try to make the whole story as beautiful as possible. I try to make the words and sentences as beautiful as possible. About half of what I write I take out because they're too much for my simplicity. It has to be first of all true; then it can be beautiful.

• P O E T ' S • C O R N E R •

Hand-me-down: A poem for Aunt Nina

Nancy Compton Williams
J.O. Johnson High School, Huntsville, Alabama

A quarter century ago
you stood in this Pendleton plaid
teaching beloved ideas—
praising young ones.
Your gift to the world
continues on in me
as I stand before
the new generation
in your old Pendleton plaid.
Together we mold, comfort, inspire.
I am the daughter you never had.
We birth others who will bear our name.

The Work and So

G. E. Geiger is Special Co-
Librarian at Auburn University.
He gathers and displays books and
manuscripts of all kinds written
by Alabamians. His regular column
in *Alabama English* focuses on
a group of Alabama writers and

This is a bibliographic and
Thomas Rountree's tribute to
Strode published in the last issue of
Alabama English. Since Rountree's
feeling of what it must have been
to work with Strode, I decided to do
a bibliographic follow-up. At the
beginning, I intended to interview
students of Strode who had read
a single novel or work of his.
However, with few authors receiving
the acclaim of Harriet Beecher
Stowe, Strode proved too difficult. The
search expanded my original idea
as many of Strode's students
identify and listed Strode's works
well. The search yielded several
some with only one book, and
with several published volumes.

As Rountree says, Strode
pursued interesting and varied
after completing their work.
For example, Hugo Black was
Supreme Court Justice for many years
now an attorney, practicing law in
Miami. He produced an interesting
memoir to his father. W