

10 Years of ThrillerFest— THE MASTERS SPEAK

By Kimberley Howe

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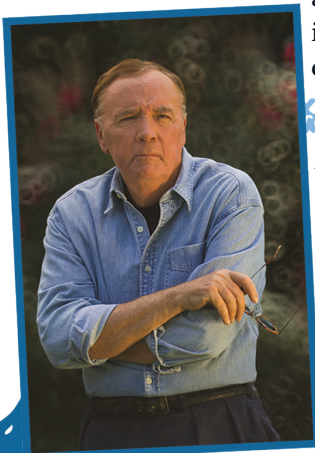


Ten years ago, the first ThrillerFest launched in Phoenix, Arizona. Since this inaugural event, the International Thriller Writers organization has grown exponentially, and the NYC-based conference now annually hosts 1,000 thriller enthusiasts from across the globe. The presentation of a lifetime achievement accolade called the “ThrillerMaster Award” is the pinnacle of our weeklong gathering. Ten iconic authors have received this award, and we wanted to check in with these masters of suspense to explore their views of the thriller genre.

2006 CLIVE CUSSLER

Our first ThrillerMaster’s adventure novels introduced readers to a spectacular underwater world of treasures, taking us on Dirk Pitt’s journeys into the ocean’s depths. In this case, fiction mirrored reality, as the California-born Cussler founded a non-profit organization called NUMA—National Underwater & Marine Agency—where his marine experts have discovered over 60 historically significant wreck sites.

Akin to his NUMA submarine, Clive constantly resurfaces on the top of the bestseller lists, and feels that the thriller genre will go “nowhere but up.” An avid collector of classic automobiles, Clive now divides his time between the mountains of Colorado and the deserts of Arizona. When asked about the proudest moment in his career, he quips, “When they burned my books in a parking lot in Georgia.” This master of thrills has plans for more adventures, and we look forward to fastening our seatbelts for the entertaining ride.



2007 JAMES PATTERSON

Prolific is the key word when it comes to our second ThrillerMaster James Patterson who has created a dynasty of series characters, including the iconic Alex Cross. When asked what project he is currently working on, Jim responds, “That would be projects, plural. It’s like plotlines, you know? If you only have one going you’re falling down on the job. Let’s see—I am at work putting into various degrees of peril the lives of characters whose last names are Boxer, Bennett, Grimm, Ride, Morgan, Khatchadorian, Jordan, MacDonald, Kidd, and Cross to name a few. And then there are some TV shows and movies coming. And some science fiction, some mystery, some mice.” Needless to say, Patterson fans will have plenty of titles to choose from on their next foray

to the bookstore.

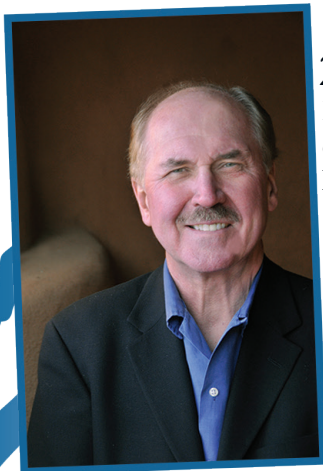
Jim's seamless prose and short chapters have captured a new generation of admirers, but his proudest moment rests closer to home, as he eloquently shares what matters to him most: "Helping my son Jack to become a reader. That ability of ours as writers to turn other people into readers—that is where the real payday is, here and in heaven. I really believe that. Helping people become readers is nothing short of holy work. We should feel very good about it."

2008 SANDRA BROWN

Texas-born Sandra Brown has written over 70 books, tackling challenging subjects with great depth and insight, and breaking ground in what had traditionally been a testosterone-laden field. "As the first woman writer to be honored as ThrillerMaster, I felt I shared the recognition with all the other women who had dared write, and succeed, in a male-dominated genre. I considered it a breakthrough, a firm stamp of approval, for all of us."

One of the proudest moments in Sandra's career touches on education. "I didn't finish college, so being given a Doctorate of Humane Letters by TCU was incredibly gratifying. I never thought I'd be addressed as Dr. Brown!"

Sandra's fans will be thrilled to hear that her word processor never takes a holiday. "There's always a novel in some stage of completion—somewhere between the first notes and the final draft." This sought-after television hostess feels that "the thriller genre will remain healthy for a long time to come. After all, it's thrived for thousands of years. Stories told in caves were about derring-do, good versus evil, struggling to survive against formidable foes. ITW has refined and more clearly defined the genre, but a hero in peril has been at the heart of a good story forever. That will never go out of style."



2009 DAVID MORRELL

Few authors have created a character with a name that transcends cultures, languages, and entertainment mediums, like David Morrell's Rambo. Our favorite professor is well known for his trailblazing tales, always exploring new territory. "This is my 43rd year as an author. With each decade, I tried a different way of writing action and suspense. The 1980s were my espionage years, for example, with 'The Brotherhood of the Rose' trilogy. Recently, my unhappiness with the modern world prompted me to write about the fogbound streets of 1850s London and one of the most sensational personalities of the era, the opium-eater Thomas De Quincey. He and those fogbound streets still fascinate me, but when they don't, I'll move on."

It may surprise and comfort writers across the world when David shares, "Self-doubt is one of my constant emotions. At the start of each writing session, I tell myself that yesterday's work could have been a whole lot better, and I often rewrite a scene many different ways before I decide that I reached the limit of what I can do with it. Writing brings fulfillment, yes, but mostly it brings frustration. There are always more choices and better ways to do something. What I took from the ThrillerMaster honor that ITW bestowed on me is that my self-doubt was the right attitude to have, that readers appreciated the extra effort I put in." And, if the long lines at David's ThrillerFest signings are any indication, his fans agree that his perfectionism pays off in spades.

2010 KEN FOLLETT

Ken Follett has had phenomenal success in the spy genre, but he has been equally successful writing historical sagas. He shares the moment that stands out the most in his illustrious career, "A few days ago, my accountant told me that we have now sold 25 million copies of 'The Pillars of the Earth.' I can hardly believe it."

Fans of Ken's espionage novels will be excited to hear that his "next book is a spy story set in the sixteenth century. Many people, including the Pope and the kings of Spain and France, wanted to kill Queen Elizabeth I of England. She set up the first British secret service, under Sir Francis Walsingham. He had spies and secret agents in every European capital, sending him information in coded letters. Quite modern!"



Ken is also a talented teacher, sharing his analysis of the genre. “Thrillers are about people in danger. The type of danger changes, but the excitement remains. I expect we will all come up with new perils for our heroes to experience in the future. But suspense will always be a great motor for a story.”



2011 R.L. STINE

Known for his delightful sense of humor, Bob Stine deadpans, “anyone who knows me knows that I HATE all honors and recognition. I don’t like attention. I prefer to sit alone in my apartment in total obscurity. And anyone who knows me knows that what I just said was a complete lie. I was truly honored to be named ThrillerMaster by the most popular and successful thriller authors in the country. As one of the few children’s authors in ITW, it meant an awful lot to me to be accepted and honored in that way.”

Reflecting on his incredible career, selling more than 350 million books, Bob shares, “I’m lucky. I have so many wonderful moments. Being the bestselling author in America for three years was certainly a thrill... Having the #1 kids’ TV show... having my own *Goosebumps* attraction in Disney World... amazing book tours in Australia and China. These all come to mind. But what I am most proud of is the millions of kids all over the world who discovered the joy of reading from my books.”

And Bob’s upcoming projects promise more spine-tingling tales. “I’m still turning out *Goosebumps* books, now in its 23rd year. The *Goosebumps* movie, starring Jack Black as ME, will be released in October. I have revived my YA *Fear Street* series and am writing six new *Fear Street* novels. And my first-ever picture book (with art by the wonderful Marc Brown of *Arthur* fame) will be released in August.”

2012 JACK HIGGINS

A former soldier and teacher, Jack Higgins is one of two ThrillerMasters from the U.K. His proudest career moment was back in 1975 when he “sold the first million copies of ‘The Eagle Has Landed,’ which seemed incredible.” And the demand for this spy thriller has never waned. “I would never have imagined that it would have been selling as solidly as it has done in the last 12 months.”

Known for his gritty, realistic storytelling, Jack reflects, “I have handled international terrorism from both the American and British point of view and have now taken no pleasure in the fact that the events in ‘Rain On The Dead’ seem to be happening for real whenever you look at a newspaper.”

Jack feels history is repeating itself, and this element will be echoed in the thriller genre. “Years ago because of my military service during the Cold War, I did not think it would come to the surface again, and yet Putin seems to think otherwise. So, I reckon the interest for a contemporary thriller writer is the resurgence of the Cold War.”



2013 ANNE RICE

Anne Rice’s books have sold almost 100 million copies, placing her among the most popular authors in American history. When Anne learned that she was to be presented with the ThrillerMaster award she, “was so honored! I felt like a member of something. I was so grateful. To be honored in this way by one’s fellow writers. I was overwhelmed.”

Fans of Anne’s vampire novels, brace yourselves for some spectacular news, as she is, “working on ‘Blood Paradise,’ a vampire novel, involving my hero, Lestat de Lioncourt. It’s a big sprawling ‘everything but the kitchen sink’ kind of novel.”

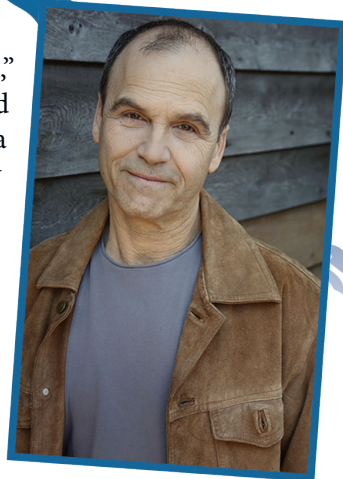
Asked about the future of thrillers, Anne expounds, “I think the thriller genre is so healthy and vigorous—and so respected—that we will see more and more originality—more experiments in prose style and novel structure, new and different characters no one ever imagined before, inventive stories that baffle and delight, that kind of thing. Once a genre has a strong hold, then the scope broadens, and you have greater and greater variety and more and more surprises.”

2014 SCOTT TUROW

Attorney Scott Turow took the thriller world by storm with his first book, “Presumed Innocent,” and has been creating unique characters and compelling stories ever since. “Being honored as ThrillerMaster meant a lot to me. The list of prior honorees meant that I was joining a distinguished lineage. My predecessors are all people I think of as great writers. It is truly humbling to think that I’ve arrived at a point where I can keep company with authors so distinguished.”

Fans of Scott’s legal thrillers, take note. He’s currently “working on a novel set at the International Criminal Court at The Hague. It focuses on an American lawyer who’s thrown over everything in his life to move to The Netherlands and to undertake an investigation of the murder of 1200 Roma in Bosnia in 2004, perhaps by US forces under NATO command.”

When asked about the future of the thriller genre, Scott shares, “The thriller in its many forms is the dominant literary mode of the moment, and I see no sign of declining popularity. In fact, self-publishing has brought many burgeoning thriller writers to a reading public that continues to have a strong appetite for our work. Readers still love a strong story, a protagonist in danger and plenty of surprises for her or him.”



2015 NELSON DEMILLE

At ThrillerFest X in July, we’ll be honoring the talented Nelson DeMille. And what a special moment it will be for him, and all of us, as he shares, “Believe it or not, in 40 years of writing I’ve never been the recipient of an award, so this is a unique honor.”

Our future ThrillerMaster offers some thoughtful insights on the suspense genre. “When I started out in this business in the 1970s, most thriller novels were set against the Cold War, or were novels about post-World War II Nazis up to no good. The world has changed and so has the thriller. Ironically, my first hardcover, ‘By the Rivers of Babylon,’ was about Islamic terrorism, which was not a common subject in 1978. And now this is a major topic for thriller writers. I sense, however, that the public, and perhaps writers themselves, are getting a bit weary of this topic which we see enough of on the nightly news. My guess is that younger writers will focus on cyberterrorism, and the villains will be China, Russia, or smaller countries with big ambitions and crazy leaders, like North Korea or Iran. Or perhaps even deranged individuals, who have access to advanced technology. Heroes are easy to create; good villains are more of a challenge and the better the villain, the better the story.”

Sage advice for all authors, aspiring or bestselling. The future of thrillers is as of yet unwritten, and may surprise us all. As ITW co-founder and ThrillerMaster David Morrell explains, “It’s impossible to know where the thriller genre is going, but one thing I know is that it’s a mistake for authors to chase the market. No one could have predicted the success of Stieg Larsson’s ‘The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’ or Gillian Flynn’s ‘Gone Girl,’ the two major thriller successes after Dan Brown’s ‘The Da Vinci Code’ in 2003. Those books seemed to come out of nowhere and inspired a herd of similarly themed novels. Notice all the unreliable narrators that are suddenly the vogue in thrillers, thanks to Gillian Flynn’s example. One mantra I teach my writing students is, ‘Be a first-rate version of yourself and not a second-rate version of another author.’ The next thriller megaseller will be as unexpected as the titles I just mentioned.”

Congratulations to all ten ThrillerMasters on their incredible body of work. We hope that you’ll come help us celebrate the past, present, and future of the thriller genre at ThrillerFest in NYC at the Grand Hyatt from July 7-11, 2015! ■

Kimberley Howe is the Executive Director of ThrillerFest, the annual conference for the International Thriller Writers, and she has the honor of winning three Daphne du Maurier awards for excellence in mystery and suspense. A medical, health, and fitness writer, she also has a Master’s in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. Travel and adventure fuel her imagination. She has been cage-diving with Great White sharks in South Africa, raced camels in Jordan, zip-lined in Costa Rica, and interacted with elephants in Botswana. Home is Toronto, Canada, but she is often missing in action.

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