



Interview: Mary Carter, Author of ‘A Southern Christmas,’ Part of ‘Our First Christmas’ Holiday Romance Anthology

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Mary Carter is a prolific author and a relative newcomer to Chicago. She has published nine novels and six novellas, and has several exciting projects in the works including a new novel, *London from My Windows* (July 2015), and an upcoming mystery series. Mary has a degree in acting from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, is an experienced Sign Language interpreter, and is a writing coach at [The Writers’ Loft](#) founded by Jerry Cleaver.

We sat down at a local Starbucks on a chilly Monday to talk about her upcoming projects and her latest release, [A Southern Christmas, part of Our First Christmas](#), a holiday anthology including three other novellas, by Lisa Jackson, Mary Burton and Cathy Lamb.

Thanks for taking the time to speak with me today. Can you fill us in on how you got started writing?

I think I’ve always been a writer and my first short story was when I was four years old. After that, besides writing stories and doing well at it in school, I wrote poetry and essays. Then I went on to acting school. I use a lot of what I learned in my training as an actress. I wrote plays and had a staged reading of one of them. I’m a voracious reader and I read a book back in 2002 or 2003 that I thought was terrible. I thought *how the heck did this get published?* It kind of inspired me to try my own novel.

The first year I had a mess of pages that didn’t go anywhere and that’s when I ordered Jerry Cleaver’s correspondence program called The Complete Story. I applied those teachings to the mess of a novel I had and the second year I finished it in about nine months. It sounds like a lot of luck and part of it is but I’d actually

done a ton of work on it and I sent it out and got an agent within two weeks. They sold *She'll Take It* four months later to [Kensington Books](#). I've been with them ever since, and I'm going to be writing a murder mystery series for them under a pen name in addition to my Mary Carter novels.

Can you tell me a little about the novella you contributed to the anthology *Our First Christmas*?

It's a romance novella called [A Southern Christmas](#) and it's based in Wilmington, NC, where I lived for eight months. It's about a young girl who left home to become a writer in New York City and broke the heart of her long-term boyfriend who had proposed marriage before she fled. Two years later she is sent back home to cover a story on a southern holiday and she learns that her ex is engaged again. It's kind of the old tale of "she wants him back," but accompanying her is this sexy, sarcastic photographer, and fun sparks start to fly from there. I always take my novellas a little bit less seriously than my novels in the sense that I kind of play with them more and have fun with them. So it was fun to write. I think the character of Sawyer the photographer came out well.

Where did you get the idea?

I was living in [Wilmington](#) at the time. It's a cute, charming little beach town with a southern flare. I thought that would be a great setting for Christmas. I was able to see everything the town does to celebrate the holidays.

What is the worst piece of advice you ever got about writing?

"You'll never sell a novel where the heroine is a kleptomaniac."

That was the main character in your first novel, *She'll Take It*. What made you reject that advice?

This person wasn't reading the writing. And I knew I had pulled it off. I knew that I had gotten to the heart of who she was and why she was doing it. And that it wasn't something she necessarily even had control over.



When did you know you had pulled it off and what made you so sure?

After I had done several drafts of it and spent a lot of time in her head, knowing her motivations, and it's something you feel. I knew that I liked her and I believed in her and I wasn't going to let anybody tell me different.

Where did that confidence come from?

From doing the work. I think if you go through enough drafts and you've truly done your work then you're much more able to sift through feedback. It's the writers who think it comes out perfectly the first time that may have a harder time sifting through feedback. But if I've considered all the options, then I know when to listen to my gut and when somebody might be right.

If she came across as unlikeable then I would have understood his note, but the people who get me and her sense of humor liked her.

There are obviously different levels of success in publishing. I find it fascinating that you treat it like a regular job. It's something you love to do and you sit down and do it. You don't seem to mess with all the other stuff. What's it like for you?

I'm not living any kind of glamourized author life. I remember my agent saying with my first novel, "This will open so many doors for you, you won't believe it." But my writing life is a little bit isolated. I don't do book tours. I'm not a bestseller. I think that's a different status that I might reach someday but haven't yet. I think there are actually a lot more of me, you just don't hear about us – the working writer making our living at it. It's not all the fame and riches that people think about when they want to become a novelist. That doesn't mean I'm not proud of all I've accomplished. The most prestigious thing I get asked to do is speak at a college or school.

How long does it take you to finish a book?

I get about a book a year – about three months of procrastinating and dreaming about it and nine months of actually writing it. I'm not very good at working on two at once.

What's your writing routine?

I do not have one. I absolutely do not have one. Once I get into the writing, I am touching base with it five days a week. Then I do set word count goals so I know when I have to finish the first draft and how many months I have to rewrite it.

I've always worked a day job while writing every single book. That's why I don't have a set writing time. Now I'm teaching writing at night but I spend a lot of the day critiquing other writing and getting ready for the class. So my writing always kind of fits in whenever I can fit it in.

Does rewriting come easily to you?

I always have been a little bit good at rewriting because I enjoy that part the most. The actual re-imagining things and taking things out and strengthening things, I'm much more comfortable with that process than the first draft.

There's always a point where I think I can't save it or this is where it tanks or I won't finish on time, and then it reaches a turning point. Now I trust myself that I can fix whatever needs to be fixed. If you give it enough time before you reread it, you'll know what scenes get an emotional response, are exciting and you like reading, and you'll know which ones don't work. I'm getting better at being really brutally honest about that with myself and then doing whatever it takes to fix the ones that aren't working.

You sound a little surprised that you're actually still getting better.

Well I didn't know how much teaching it... you can't teach it almost every day and then go back to rewriting and not go "everything I'm teaching them, I'm doing myself." There's no conflict. Teaching something does help mastery with it.

What are the top three things that got you to this point?

Number one would be my background in acting.

Can you clarify that? What specifically about acting?

The first thing our acting teacher handed out was a sheet of paper and at the top of the page it said, “Man is a wanting animal.” The second thing is that in every single scene, you ask what does my character want, what’s standing in the way of getting it, and what are they doing to get it. And of course there’s tons of emotion involved. Figuring out your character, where did they come from, what are their motivations, it’s all the same. I had an ear for dialogue from reading tons and tons of scripts. I know how dialogue sounds so I think I was already pretty good at that.

Number two is I’m a voracious reader.

And number three, I started writing stories when I was four, “The Boy and the Mouse.”

Since this is a Christmas-themed novella, can you tell us your favorite family [Christmas tradition](#)?

Getting and decorating the tree was always my favorite thing. I’ve always loved buying presents even when it’s not the holidays. I like it much more than buying for myself.

How will you spend Christmas this year?

I’m going to LA where my mother, sister, niece and nephew live. I probably will do some celebrating in Chicago – get a tree or something – although I don’t necessarily trust my labradoodle with the ornaments.

What one piece of advice would you give to a beginning writer?

Don’t give up.

Why – what if someone isn’t any good at it?

You can always get better.

I’m trying to figure this out with my advanced class. I don’t completely know where I got it from but when I decided to do something about the fact that I didn’t know how to improve that mess of pages I had, I was absolutely determined. Then I got that clear-cut advice from Jerry’s program. I was able to get the idea of what rewriting was all about and how that can take something from a horrible first draft and then the next draft you make it suck a little bit less and then a little bit less until you finally get it pretty darn good.

When I finally had that drive to do that, there’s nothing that would have stopped me. And I never would have wanted to show it to somebody until I had made it the best story I could make it with my current skill level.

How does that differ from what you’re seeing with students in your advanced class?

So many writers seem to want me to do it for them. And I probably could but I don’t know how to instill that drive in them because that’s absolutely what it takes to not write just one novel, but nine. You have to care so much about writing the best story you can write. And so many writers, when they have doubts or they don’t know how to fix something or they don’t trust that first drafts are allowed to be bad, they will stop in the middle and start a new story. Because they haven’t gone through and gotten to the other end of that experience.

I don’t know how to tell them that they’re going to experience that with every story they write. Because it’s not about the story. It’s part of that first draft process of hitting the wall like maybe a runner would hit a wall. You have to learn what it feels like to get on the other side of that wall or it will come up time and again. I know so

many talented writers and they stop when they hit that wall and they start something new and years later they're still asking for help and I want to tell them you could have been done with it by now.

Any last thoughts for the beginners out there?

Learn to tell what your story is about in one sentence. Narrow your focus. Stories have to be *about* something.

I think that anybody can do it as long as they're not fooled into thinking it's an overnight process. Scene by scene, page by page – anybody that wants to can apply themselves.

You can learn more about Mary and her books on her [website](#). Information on Mary's writing classes can be found [here](#).

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About Suzanne Brazil



Suzanne M. Brazil is a freelance writer and editor living in a recently empty nest in the suburbs of Chicago. Her work has been featured in Writer's Digest and many local publications. She is a frequent blog contributor and recently finished her first novel.