

# THE BIG THRILL

**Prolific thriller author JON LAND gets real about mentorship, storytelling, and staying relevant in the current publishing climate.**

**BY K. L. ROMO**

**C**onsidered a trailblazer in the thriller genre, Jon Land has a diverse publication list. Although this prolific author has written more than 40 books, both fiction and nonfiction, his skill with storytelling and the written word goes hand-in-hand with his involvement in the writer community. Recognizing the importance of creating characters not traditionally seen in the thriller genre, one of his popular fictionalized characters is fifth-generation female Texas Ranger Caitlin Strong; two others are a Palestinian detective and an Israeli chief police inspector. Land has also taken over writing the popular *Murder, She Wrote* mystery series, featuring female amateur sleuth Jessica Fletcher.

As an emeritus board member and current marketing chair of the International Thriller Writers (ITW) organization, Land deeply embraces the mission of the group – helping debut and mid-list thriller writers advance their careers. In a recent interview, Land was all too gracious to let us pick his brain about craft, diversity in publishing, and paying it forward in the writing community.

**What is the most important piece of successful writing advice you've followed?**

A few years ago, my brilliant editor and agent, Natalia Aponte, repeated to me something she'd read from James Lee Burke, I believe: "When writing a scene, always know where the light is coming from." This really resonated with me because I write exclusively from a character's viewpoint. That means the reader can see only, and exactly, what my characters see. As a writer, following that advice means seeing the world you've created beneath the light shining upon it or, sometimes, the lack of light. It's a vital lesson in scene setting and also helps me sprinkle in my descriptions through a scene instead of dumping everything at the beginning.

**What is a piece of writing advice that didn't work for you?**

That's easy: Write what you know. It may have worked for Hemingway, but it's terrible advice for a fiction author because we are constrained only by the limits of our imaginations, not our knowledge. Being a great storyteller is all about what you feel and the situations you invent for your characters. If we all stuck to writing what we knew, very few of us would have more than one book to write, if that.

**How have you written and published over 40 books since 1986? Is there a particular method you use that allows you to be such a prolific writer?**

No matter what I'm writing, I always remind myself to tell a story. The story is everything, and sometimes that means getting out of the way and letting it take you where it needs to go or where the characters want it to go. You need to trust the process, always keeping in mind the definition of story, the most important three words in any writer's lexicon: beginning, middle, end.

**Your novels include diverse characters, and some are staged in other countries. Is this portrayal of diverse cultures important to you? If so, why?**

What's important to me is telling a great story, and the points raised in this two-part question reflect part of what goes into a great story. Those questions made me smile a bit, given a certain occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue's regard for diversity. Being only a second-generation American myself, I despise that attitude with a passion and find myself with a desire to make my characters even more diverse. The favorite character of many from my Caitlin Strong series is the giant, deadly killer (and Caitlin's protector) Guillermo Paz.



## Fast facts with Jon Land

**What types of books do you like to read for pure pleasure?**

Thrillers, of course, but I also love to be scared. Most books fade away once you finish them, but books like Stephen King's *Doctor Sleep* or his son Joe Hill's *Heart Shaped Box* still stand out in my mind. The ability for a book to still scare you reminds us we're all still kids at heart.

**When you read for pleasure, do you prefer print books, eBooks, or audiobooks?**

I'm strictly a hard copy reader. Love having a book in my hands.

**Do you ever have days when you are "unconnected" from the web?**

I seldom am "unconnected" for longer than an hour! So guilty as charged!

**Do you use any writerly apps, and if so, what are your favorites?**

Hmm, I don't think I have any.

**What is an interesting fact about you that readers don't already know?**

I have no intention of ever fully growing up!

**How has outreach to other authors and aspiring writers and mentoring school kids affected your writing career? What is your philosophy about helping others in the writing community?**

So much of whatever level of success I've achieved has been the product of others believing, mentoring, nurturing, and promoting me. This is a world and a business where nothing happens in a vacuum, and I am a firm believer of paying back. So, it's only natural that I want to treat authors the same way I was treated, and that means going out of my way to help them the way others helped me. I'd say outreach has been a prime factor in keeping me humble, reminding me that no matter how much I have left to accomplish, I'm very lucky to have accomplished what I have.

**How have you injected a "fresh approach" to the *Murder, She Wrote* series?**

To begin with, I was replacing a legend in Donald Bain, who'd written 46 books in the series before they brought me in to work with and then succeed him. That's more books than Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot series. Think about that for a moment. As a thriller writer, I had to rely on my instincts to inject more pacing and plotting into the writing. Since I was far more familiar with the television show, I decided to capture the tone and texture of that. Truth be told, Jessica Fletcher is portrayed differently on the show than in the books and that's the way I've chosen to portray her, while trying to strike a delicate balance that will still please the legion of Don's fans. While I think I've succeeded in that to a great degree, there are readers disappointed in my approach. But I can only stay true to her voice I'm channeling in my head. I write organically, relying on what feels right, and so far in *A Date With Murder* and the forthcoming *Manuscript For Murder*, I love what

I've done and know I'm not going to please everybody.

**How has working on the *Murder, She Wrote* project been different from writing the thrillers in your series?**

First and foremost, *Murder, She Wrote* marks the first time I've ever written in first person, which I find strangely refreshing. Second and just as important, while I've added an edge to the series, my writing as Jessica will never be as intense, relentless, violent and at times as dark as my Caitlin Strong thrillers. As far as advice goes, I'm going to keep it simple by quoting my late, great first agent, Toni Mendez: "If you know your characters, you can write anything." I would only add that, as in my case, you must be true to yourself.

When you think of great episodes from the TV series, like "Murder Takes the Bus," there's a sense of

make these cozy mysteries no less vital. The real challenge I face is trying to blend the tone of the television show with the tone of the books. I need to walk a fine line as I try to keep regular series readers happy while capturing what made the TV show so iconic. There are very few book series that ever reach 46 titles, never mind one where a new author is brought in at that point. Ace Atkins, for example, has done a wonderful job taking over the Spenser series from the late Robert Parker, but the television adaptation he has to contend with wasn't nearly as popular and doesn't run every night for four or more hours on cable today! And if the comments by some longtime series readers have stung me, then the comments by longtime fans of the TV show saying they can hear Angela Lansbury's voice in my dialogue, well, that's as rewarding as it gets.

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intrigue, mystery, and danger of the sort also found in Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot. I think my approach takes the series more in that direction; not necessarily away from the definition of a cozy mystery, just a cozy with a bit more "bite" in the form of plot mechanizations that make you want to keep turning the pages. In other words, back to the spirit of the television show.

For me, the central mystery, Jessica's quest, has to take center stage with the parts of her life that truly

The worst thing I could have done with *Murder, She Wrote* was try to imitate Don Bain. That would've been a recipe for failure.

**How have you worked to remain relevant in the *Murder, She Wrote* series?**

I think relevance is a prime component of telling a great story. So, I can't say it was a conscious decision on my part so much as an instinctive one. I can only write books I'd read if someone else had written them (to paraphrase Robert Louis Stevenson). And

the kind of plotting that makes a book more relevant in terms of content makes it, intrinsically, more fun to read. A sinister dating service forms the backdrop for *A Date With Murder* and in my third effort, *Murder In Red*, I'm going to include both a perilous private hospital and a big-pharma concern. Now, it's important to note Don Bain also did this in several books, including one focused on shady real estate deals. So, I'm not reinventing the wheel with this, so much as making it turn faster and smoother, integrating more pop culture into Jessica's adventures.

**One of the main missions of ITW is for successful, best-selling authors to help debut and mid-list authors advance their careers. How have you personally addressed this mission?**

I'd never been part of a writers organization before and was amazed at how nice, warm, and friendly everybody was. Tone like that is set at the top, and with ITW it starts with David Morrell, Gayle Lynds, Steve Berry, James Rollins, Sandra Brown, Lee Child, and many more. The key word is accessibility, which breeds a desire to go out of their/our way to help others. I was just thinking the other day how much ITW has done for my career – an incredible, immeasurable amount, really. I address ITW's mission by never forgetting the benefits I've gained from the organization, and when I'm asked or have the opportunity, I will contribute in any and all ways.

**What should authors look for when choosing a writers organization?**

First off, look for one that is appropriate to your genre and, secondly, one that best fits your needs. Take ITW's ThrillerFest conference, for example. The first two days are devoted to craft and the second two days focus more on fan and reader-oriented topics. I look at writers organizations as support systems, as well as a great way to network. I think the key is engagement

and mission statement. In other words, what is the organization's purpose and how does that purpose serve your needs as a writer? What opportunities are there for engagement? In ITW, we have a mentoring program, a debut author program, an author support program and, of course, ThrillerFest. So before joining a writers organization, ask yourself what you want to get out of it, what you want to give to it, and choose the one that best fits those categories. And remember, you can join as many of them as you want! Many, like ITW, are free or have nominal membership fees.

**As one of the pioneers of thriller/suspense, do you think the genre has developed like you'd envisioned?**

Thanks for the great compliment, but I'm not worthy of it. I think about reading the likes of David Morrell, Clive Cussler, Robert Ludlum, and Stephen King – these writers made me want to do what I'm fortunate enough to have spent my adult life doing. I grew up on Doc Savage, James Bond, and the Executioner. At their heart, thrillers have retained the magic and wonder of those great adventures mastered by my idols mentioned above. Some writers set the standard and others strive to meet it. I believe I fall into the latter category, and I don't consider that to be a bad thing at all.

**As an author, what are your thoughts on the changing landscape of the publishing industry?**

I took a lot of things for granted when I encountered success right out of the box in mass-market paperback. Each of my first eight or so books sold better than the one before, to the point where I deluded myself into believing it would always be that way. When it wasn't anymore, I was slow to respond, and that cost me dearly. Want to know why I'm writing four books a year? Because I have to – and because if an opportunity feels right, I

can't turn it down. This has become an industry where the benchmark of success has been replaced by relevance, and I feel the current climate leaves me forever striving to remain relevant. This is why I'm ever so grateful for the opportunity to take over *Murder, She Wrote* and continue to build my audience.

**Is there a particular social media outlet that you prefer and feel is better suited for writers?**

I love Twitter because of the engagement. Perfect for writers.

**When posting to social media, how much personal info should/could an author post without crossing a line?**

I have a rule about social media: promotion only. No politics or personal minutia. If you check out my daily tweets, you'll see a lot of fun, upbeat posts, many of which are aimed at the creative community. I struggled on social media at first, doing what I thought I was supposed to do, instead of what comes naturally. And my goal is that when you read my social media posts, you will have no idea on which side of the political aisle I come down.

**How can a published author gain more traction in the market?**

Write great books. I know that answer may sound like a cop-out, but nothing else matters if you don't write something others will want to read and enjoy so much they can't wait for your next. Ford has long been one of the great marketing companies in American commerce history, but even Ford couldn't sell the Edsel. 

K.L. Romo writes about life on the fringe: teetering dangerously on the edge is more interesting than standing safely in the middle. She is passionate about women's issues, loves noisy clocks and fuzzy blankets, but HATES the word *normal*. Her historical novel, *Life Before*, is an edgy, time-warping tale of reincarnation, social justice, and forgiveness. Web: [KLRomo.com](http://KLRomo.com) or [@KLRomo](https://twitter.com/KLRomo).