

## Interview with the Queen of Romance, Author Brenda Jackson By: Michelle Cuttino

Born in Jacksonville, Florida, Brenda Jackson is a proud graduate of William M. Raines High School, and also earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Jacksonville University. She married thirty-nine years ago to her high school sweetheart, Gerald, and have two sons, Gerald Jr. and Brandon, ages thirty-three and thirty-one, respectively. She still proudly wears the “going-steady” ring Gerald gave her at fifteen.

We caught up with Jackson to discuss her myriad titles and her advice on how to gain longevity in the romance and fiction genres.

**Michelle:** Brenda, I’m so honored to be speaking with you today. You have surpassed the norm when it comes to African American (AA) Literature and have had a lot of “firsts” as an AA Romance Writer, becoming the breakthrough author under the Harlequin/Silhouette Desire line, leading the way for other AA authors as you occupied the USA Today Bestseller’s List and the New York Times Bestseller’s List, and now you’ve become the first to fully finance and produce a full-length feature film based on one of your novels. What do you attribute to these achievements? What are you doing or what have you done differently from everyone else?

**Brenda:** I attribute the mottos – “If you can believe it then you can achieve it,” as well as, “The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a man's determination.” I think all authors who are in it for the long haul have the same drive and determination I have. I attribute my working in Corporate American for 37 years and knowing how to think out of the box as well as handling my writing as a business. But I’m certain I’m not the only author doing so. I also maintain a great relationship with my readers.

**Michelle:** Besides self-publishing, you have also written for many publishers including St. Martin’s Press, BET, Kensington, NAL, Harlequin/Silhouette and Harlequin Kimani Romance. Now that you are writing exclusively for Harlequin, do you think you will continue to self-publish novels that may not fit into their criteria, or will you just stick to their guidelines and crank out novels only for their imprint?

**Brenda:** Yes, I will continue to self-publish novels under my own publishing company – The Madaris Publishing Company – for the reason you stated. My loyalty is with my readers who might want a certain book that don’t fit within the guidelines established because of the hero and heroine ages, the heroine size or a certain plot. That way I can write the story I want without the restrictions.

**Michelle:** The number of awards you've received is staggering, and range from Reader's Choice to Favorite Hero to Author of the Year to Best Multi-Cultural Romance Author. Of all the awards you've ever received, what have been your three most significant accolades, and why these three over everything else?

**Brenda:** Being the first AA Romance Author to make the NY Times Bestseller's and the USA Today Bestsellers' Lists. Also the Vivian Stephens Career Achievement Award. Vivian Stephens, the first AA editor at Harlequin who is the founder of Romance Writers of America. Now the organization has over 8,000 members.

**Michelle:** You have written over eighty-five books, and the number is steadily increasing. Of that total a great amount of those novels are intertwining storylines. Where did your penchant for writing connecting stories come from?

**Brenda:** I love reading connecting stories, because you aren't just reading about a hero and heroine, but about their family and many friends. Nora Roberts had her McGregor series which I loved; and Linda Howard had her McKenzie series, so I figured since the letter "M" was gold to them, I would come up with my own family and name them the Madarises. I don't consider writing as work because it relaxes me so much and I love writing about family. I come from a big family so I love family stories.

**Michelle:** *Tonight and Forever* was the first book you ever released. Tell us a little about the book and why you think it has been such a huge success.

**Brenda:** I think it is a success because it was my first book to introduce the Madaris Family. Justin, the hero, is such a sweetheart and a Beta man versus an Alpha man. After reading that book, women wanted a Madaris Man. And it's a beautiful love story about lost love and second chances.

**Michelle:** I've read that your novel *Ties That Bind* took you the longest to research and write. What made this story so much more complex than all the others?

**Brenda:** It took such a long time because of the research and the frame of mind I needed to get to write the book. The story starts out in 1968 when I was 13 and I only knew what I'd heard about the Vietnam War and the Black Panthers. I wanted to know the real deal so I did interviews. I had to also familiarize myself with the music of the day, what people were eating, and what was happening in the news during that time. I've never done that much research for a book before. It was very rewarding.

**Michelle:** With so many accomplishments as an author and a steady influx of income from writing, why did you only consider it to be a "hobby" and what took you so long to retire from the corporate world?

**Brenda:** Because I loved Corporate America and my goal was to move up in that world. Writing was something I enjoyed and I never considered it as work. Where most people look forward to retirement, I really didn't. State Farm was an awesome place to work. I started working there at 17 and right out of high school. I got my four-year degree at State Farm using their employee tuition program. I credited them with teaching me good management, customer service and people skills.

**Michelle:** I know your fans were disappointed with the made-for-TV movie adaptation of your book, *One Special Moment*, stating that it strayed too far away from the storyline. How did you feel about that entire experience?

**Brenda:** The entire experience taught me if you want something done the way you want it done then do it yourself. That's how *Truly Everlasting - The Movie* came into existence. The entire experience also gave me a greater appreciation for not only actors and actresses but the entire production team - who are behind the scenes during the movie making process. It made me realize how important they are. Now I don't leave the movie until after the last credit has been rolled.

**Michelle:** Your eldest son, Gerald Jackson, Jr. is the owner of his own production company, Five Alive Films, which produced your book trailers in the past. They are now the force behind your independent movie venture for *Truly Everlasting*. How has "keeping it in the family" been beneficial to you during the complete process?

**Brenda:** It's been a wonderful experience to work with my son who holds a film degree from Columbia University Film School and a grad degree in Film from Florida State Film School. We are learning from each other. I am learning the art side of film-making and he is learning the business end. I hope to do more movie trailers and full-length feature films using his company.

**Michelle:** Of all your novels, what stood out about *Truly Everlasting* to make that the selection for the movie and what has been the reaction since the film's premiere on November 5, 2011 in Jacksonville, FL?

**Brenda:** I looked over all my 80-plus novels and novellas and selected one I thought would fit in my budget. After my son wrote the script I did an estimated cost analysis and figured I could make it comfortably in my price range if I set up an action plan that also incorporated interns from various film schools across the country.

**Michelle:** We all know that you are a helpless romantic and still don the "going-steady" ring your husband gave you when you were 14. What many don't know is that you like color. Not paint, but color! WOW! So with your growing coloring book assortment and overwhelming crayon collection, my question is... Does Brenda Jackson color "in the lines," or do you add your own blend of "shading" to your coloring book pages?

**Brenda:** LOL, I add my own blend of shading. Not only do I like thinking out of the box but I don't have a problem coloring outside the box as well as long as it's neat and in order.

**Michelle:** Brenda, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to give us a peek into the mind of a woman considered to be a literary genius. With that being said, If you were to teach a writing workshop tomorrow, and you had to give a list of crucial "Do's" and "Don'ts" when it comes to being a successful author, what would they be?

**Brenda:**

- 1) Do write from your heart
- 2) Do follow your dream
- 3) Do respect your readers. Without them your book is just another book on the shelf
- 4) Do pay your dues. I'm finding a lot of the new authors want a quick fix. Respect those who paved the way to make things easier for you, but it still takes hard work on your part to succeed.
- 5) Don't assume having a successful writing career is easy.
- 6) Don't assume you can ride on someone else's coattails to be a great author.

**Author's Bio:**

Just to share a little information about me, I was born in Jacksonville, Florida. I am a proud graduate of William M. Raines High School, and I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Jacksonville University.

I got married thirty-nine years ago to my high school sweetheart, Gerald, and we have two sons, Gerald Jr. and Brandon, ages thirty-three and thirty-one, respectively. I still proudly wear the going-steady ring Gerald gave me at fifteen. A few years ago I retired after working 37 years in management for a major insurance company, and I am now writing full-time and enjoying every minute of it.

I began my writing career in the eighth grade at Northwestern Junior High School, when I would hand-write my stories for fellow classmates to read. I'm proud to say some of those same classmates are still Brenda Jackson readers today!!

I have written more than 90 novels and novellas and have over 3 million books in print. My professional writing career began in 1994 when I signed on with Kensington Arabesque. My first book, *Tonight and Forever*, became a huge success, introducing the Madaris Family. Since then I have introduced the Bennetts, the Westmorelands, the

Montgomerys, the Masters, the Savoys, and the Steeles. A listing of my books can be found on this website. And because I love writing connecting stories, I have a listing of how my books connect in my various family saga series.

Over the years I have received numerous awards and made many trail-blazing accomplishments by being the first African-American author to have a book published under the Harlequin/Silhouette Desire line of books and the first African-American romance author to make USA Today's Bestseller's List and the New York Times Bestseller's List for the series romance genre. Click here to view a printable list of my awards.

I have written for the following publishers: St. Martins Press, BET, Kensington, NAL, Harlequin/Silhouette and Harlequin Kimani Romance. Presently, I am writing exclusively for Harlequin, and I'm excited to have all my books under one dynamic publishing house.

I am proud to be a 2012 NAACP Image Award Nominee for my 81st book, A Silken Thread. I am also a strong supporter of giving back to your community and have received Community Service Awards from the Delta Sigma Thetas, the AKAs and the Zeta Phi Beta Sororities. And because I believe in the power of education, in honor of my grandmother, ten years ago I established the Josiephine Threatt Scholarship Foundation at Florida Memorial University in Miami Gardens, Florida. Over \$100,000 have been donated to this Foundation to provide scholarships to students wanting a college education.

Last year, I wore the hat of "film-maker" when I collaborated with my son's production company, Five Alive Films, to turn one of my books, Truly Everlasting, into a feature film. For more information about the movie, please visit [www.trulyeverlasting.com](http://www.trulyeverlasting.com).

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