



My writing day

ZOË SHARP

Receiving death threats when she was a journalist provided the inspiration for one author's first novel, she tells **Lynne Hackles**

Iwould love to have a structured day, but no two days are the same, so I can't set aside certain times to write,' says crimewriter Zoe Sharp. When I'm home, in the morning I like to try and read through the output of the day before and at least make some notes on where the thing is heading. But so many things can intrude and I may not write seriously until the evening. There's something about writing when it's dark outside that puts me in the right frame of mind.

'I need a regular goal to be sure progress is being made so, when I'm into a book, I aim for 30,000 words a month, which allows for human variation so much better. Without a regular goal it's easy for time to slip by without any progress being made.

'I started off writing technical and feature articles for magazines and newspapers, specialising in motoring and, because pictures were needed, quickly added in photography. When my husband Andy joined me in the business, he began writing articles as well, then, in 1999, after finishing my first published novel, I concentrated on writing fiction. I still do the photography to illustrate Andy's work. If I'm away on photoshoots, there's often time spent in the car, during which I either work on the laptop (not while I'm driving!) or make notes for my next scene or chapter.

'I can't remember a time when I didn't want to write. At fifteen I produced my first proper novel and my father, bless him, typed it up for me with carbon copies — no word processors then — and the yellowed typescript is still in the loft. He keeps threatening to put it on eBay, and I have threatened that Dire Things will happen if it ever sees the light of day.

'My early books were written while we were living near Lancaster. Three are set in that area, with a brief return to Cheshire and the Lune Valley in *Third Strike*, just so Charlie Fox, my detective, doesn't forget her roots. I've now written seven published novels, with number eight, *Fourth Day*, which sees Charlie going undercover into a cult in California, due out in hardcover from Allison & Busby in May. And by the time you read this I'll be on the way to completing number nine.

Killer Instinct came about after I received death-threat letters in the course of my work as a journalist. It got me thinking about women's

self-defence (surprise, surprise!) and how to react to a threat. In that book, Charlie Fox is teaching self-defence classes when she is targeted by someone who is attacking local women.

'*Fourth Day* was inspired by the reports of what happened at Waco, and various other cults that have been broken up in the States. All fascinating stuff and that side of the book developed out of my research there. On the personal side, I wanted to take Charlie on a journey of some kind, and this was her path towards redemption after the events of *Third Strike*. She is hiding secrets from Sean that threaten to tear them apart, and what happens to her within the confines of the cult has a defining effect on her future.

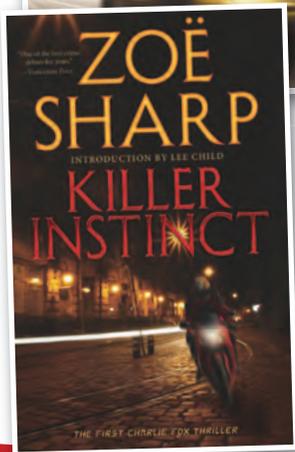
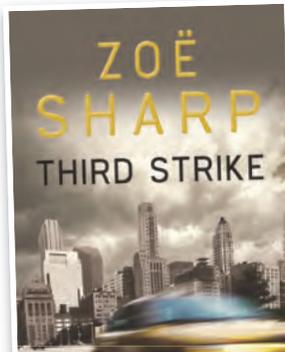
'Having decided on these themes, I put together the blurb and present this to my agent. If that gets a cautious thumbs up, it's on to a full outline, which is kicked back and forth between me and my agent's editor. And once I've managed to answer all the difficult questions, I jump in. That jumping-off point of a novel is often not the start of the story. By the time Charlie appears a lot will have happened off stage to get events to that point. It may never appear on the page, but I need to know what's happened so far.

'I ignore the old maxim, "write what you know" in favour of "write what you'd like to know". Having done a lot of research, I then attempt to leave ninety percent of it out. Getting information across in a way that appears natural is difficult, but I am writing novels, not textbooks. This is particularly the case when describing a location. It's easy to turn an establishing scene into a travel article and bore the reader to tears.

'It's tempting to research via Google, but it's no substitute for talking to a real person about the subject. You learn the shortcuts and the little trade secrets that really makes the subject seem naturally integrated into the story, rather than a self-conscious addition.'

www.zoesharp.com

Zoe also contributes regularly to www.murderati.com



BUY THE BOOK

To order a copy of *Third Strike* (Allison and Busby, £6.99pb) or any of Zoe's books, call Writers' Bookshelf, 0800 015 0554. Postage and packing is £1.95. Please have your credit card ready.

Writing Place

Andy and I self-built our home and wanted a big study but have discovered that junk expands to fill the space available. My desktop has an ergonomic keyboard, which is so easy on the wrists. I use a desk lamp rather than a main light. There's a shelf full of research books, a much-thumbed *Chambers Dictionary*; a framed four-leaf clover plucked from the garden of some friends, some spent rounds recovered from body armour, and two encouraging notes — "Think Positive!" and "Get On With It!" I'm not sure either of them work, but I keep them where I can see them, anyway.