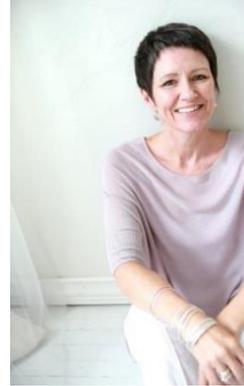


**Q&A with Mandy Mikulencak,
Author of THE LAST SUPPERS**



1. You've been a non-fiction writer and editor your entire career. What made you decide to write fiction?

About seven years ago, I attended a women's writing retreat sponsored by A Room of Her Own Foundation because I yearned to use words in a different way. I took a week-long workshop on short fiction and was hooked. After writing short stories and flash fiction, longer stories demanded to be told and I complied.

2. You don't shy away from tough subjects and themes in your writing. Why is that?

I like to write (and read) stories that illuminate the dichotomy in the human condition: that joy and redemption (and sometimes humor) can exist alongside pain and tragedy. Writers like John Irving, George Saunders and Donald Ray Pollock have inspired me to take chances. There's a wonderful freedom in writing novels that capture real life in all its beauty and ugliness.

3. What inspired you to write *The Last Suppers*?

A very good friend of mine told me about a website that listed the final words of death row inmates. Some of the entries also listed what the inmate had for his last meal. She told me about a young man who only wanted Frosted Flakes and milk. This one detail got me thinking about all of the emotion and memory behind those requests. It's rarely about the food itself. I then wondered what it would be like for a prison cook to become obsessed with finding the perfect meal for each death row inmate, even going as far as interviewing the inmate's relatives. I also wanted to explore how a complicated relationship between a warden and the prison's female cook could ensure their emotional survival in such a horrific setting.

4. Why did you choose Louisiana in the 1950s? What type of research did you conduct?

I thought it'd make a richer story to place it during a time period when prisoners were often denied their most basic human rights; a time when poverty and racial inequality were so visible. While the prison in the book is fictitious, I researched the Louisiana correctional system from the 1800s through the 1960s to find details that would make the lives of the characters more authentic. But I also took some liberties (since it's fiction) and placed two female cooks in the prison kitchen even though a penitentiary in 1950s Louisiana wouldn't have hired women.

5. Do you have a set writing schedule? Tell us more about your process.

All the advice out there says to write daily, but I've never been able to do that because of other work and life commitments, and sometimes because of those self-doubts that tell me I'll never be able to finish another novel. (I've hit that point at about the 35,000 word mark in each of the five novels I've written.) But there are days when I can write for seven hours. Because I started my career as a journalist, I've learned to write quickly and on deadline, so when it counts, I get the work done.

6. What are you currently working on?

My next novel is about a teenage girl in 1960s Mississippi who kills her father to stop him from abusing her little sisters. She's sent away to a psychiatric facility where she has to come to grips with her own abuse and how three generations of women have lived with their own secrets. See? I like messy and complicated stories. And I like Southern voices and settings. There's a richness to the culture that makes the setting one of the most interesting characters.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mandy Mikulencak has been a writer her entire working life. First, as a journalist then as an editor and PR specialist for two national nonprofits and a United Nations agency. Today she lives in the mountains of Southwest Colorado with her husband, Andy. She writes YA and adult fiction. Her first book, *Burn Girl*, has been honored with a 2016 Westchester Fiction Award.

Readers can visit Mandy online at: www.MandyMikulencak.com

THE LAST SUPPERS

By Mandy Mikulencak (pronounced "micka-len-check")

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