

Dad was too

Max Brooks, the son of Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft, grew up anxious. He has turned his worst fears into bestselling novels, he tells Helena de Bertodano

Rule No 22 in Max Brooks's new *Minecraft* novel is "always be aware of your surroundings". So it is perhaps ironic that, on my way to meet him at his home down a pedestrian alley in Venice, Los Angeles, I fail to notice a ledge in the paving stones and fall flat on my face.

Brooks — who is the only child of the actor and director Mel Brooks and the actress Anne Bancroft — has also written *The Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z*, a zombie pandemic novel that was adapted into a film starring Brad Pitt. So when I arrive on his doorstep looking not unlike a zombie myself, blood oozing from my hands and elbow, he knows exactly what to do. Taking one look at me, he turns to his dog with instructions: "Milo: attack, kill."

Happily the dog is an inoffensive poodle and Brooks is only joking. He rolls up his trouser leg and shows me a cut he got that morning. "I took a spill too." He bustles around getting plasters and patching me up. "This is exactly why I wrote the book: life throws obstacles at you and you need to adapt. That's why *Minecraft* is such a great game — it doesn't just teach creativity, it teaches something more important: resilience."

He is so nice about it that I end up feeling quite proud of myself for having provided him with such a perfect segue into his book. *Minecraft: The Island* tells the story of a hero stranded in the world of *Minecraft*, the hugely successful computer game in which you make things out of virtual blocks. Since its release eight years ago the game has entranced a generation of children (and child-adults). Up to February this year, it had sold 122 million units, making it the second bestselling video game after Tetris. In 2014 Microsoft bought *Minecraft* — and Mojang, the Swedish game studio behind it — for \$2.5 billion.

Brooks — who has a 12-year-old son, Henry, with his wife, Michelle Kholos, a playwright — has been playing *Minecraft* for years. "I realised I'd been waiting my whole life for this game," he says. "At first I played it to bond with my son, but I was more intense than him. I realised it could teach my child how to survive and how to recover from failure."

When Mojang approached him to write the book, he jumped at the opportunity, creating an old-fashioned adventure story while adhering strictly to the game. It is a nail-biting survival yarn, beautifully written in the tradition of stories such as *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Indeed, at the book's end, Brooks pays tribute "to my mom, who, long ago, thought it

would be a good idea to read a book called *Robinson Crusoe* to her son".

His mother is perhaps best known for playing Mrs Robinson in *The Graduate* — a reference that makes Brooks roll his eyes. "I remember working on a documentary at the BBC [he interned there as a student] and the producer saying, 'Oh good Lord, my first sexual experience was seeing *The Graduate*.' He meant it in a polite way, so you just go, 'Thank you,' but inside I'm thinking, 'Argggghhhh.'"

The only role that seemed to really matter to Bancroft was the one as mother to Max. Mel Brooks had three children from his first marriage, and Bancroft had already turned 40 when Max was born. "I definitely felt like I was my mum's only shot," he says.

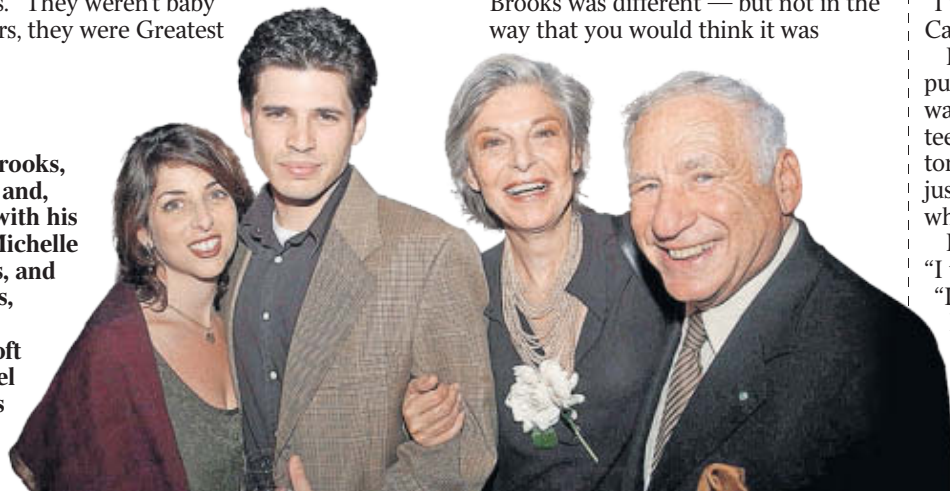
“His zombie novel World War Z was made into a film starring Brad Pitt

As a child, Brooks was diagnosed with dyslexia. "My mother gave it all up to become my teacher and advocate." As well as reading avidly to him, Bancroft introduced him to audio books, which transformed his life, and now he believes dyslexia was a blessing in disguise. "If I had been a regular kid with the ability to play the system the way it was designed, then I wouldn't have been a creative thinker and a problem solver."

Now 45, he says his upbringing was as far removed from celebrity brattiness as possible. "There's this assumption that I'm Tatum O'Neal, that I've lived a crazy celebrity life of drugs and parties. One of the great ironies of my life is I've probably lived a much more old-fashioned existence, Hollywood or not, than most people my age."

For one thing, he says, his parents were much older than his friends' parents. "They weren't baby boomers, they were Greatest

Max Brooks, above, and, right, with his wife, Michelle Kholos, and parents, Anne Bancroft and Mel Brooks



afraid to let me camp

JAMES STENSON FOR THE TIMES



Generation." And for another, they came from impoverished backgrounds in New York, his Jewish father growing up in Brooklyn and his Italian mother in the Bronx.

"My dad had his four back teeth pulled as a little kid because his mother couldn't afford to fill them. He once yelled at me because I opened a new box of cereal without finishing the old one. Boy was he mad, I had to go back and eat the dust."

I ask if Brooks Sr, the creator of *The Producers*, *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein*, was funny at home. "I didn't think so," Brooks says affectionately. "Growing up with Mel Brooks was different — but not in the way that you would think it was

different. It wasn't like my dad and Gene Wilder were doing skits around our kitchen table. Yes, they did sit around our kitchen table, but they would be talking about wine and food and where to buy furniture, who the best doctor was."

His parents were so fiercely protective they did not even let him go on school field trips. "My mum was not just overprotective, she was also a brilliant actress. So she would act out what might happen to me, and because she was raised in the Thirties the bad guy was like some bad gangster. 'Hey kid, come here,'" he says in a malevolent wheedling voice. "I was going to be kidnapped by James Cagney or Edward G Robinson."

His father was no more relaxed, putting his foot down when his son wanted to camp in the backyard as a teenager. "He said, 'What if I wake up tomorrow and you're dead?' We had just had the Night Stalker, the guy who went around killing people in LA."

Did his parents make him nervous? "I was already nervous," Brooks says. "I've always been a neurotic guy. I just have to push through it to get on with my life. My whole life and career has been about what could go wrong: *World War Z*, now *Minecraft*."

He and his father remain very close: after our interview, they

were going out to celebrate Brooks Sr's 91st birthday. They live a stone's throw from each other and every evening Mel comes over to see his grandson. "They hang out, sing songs, tell jokes, watch old movies. My father says more to him in one night than my grandfather said to me in my entire lifetime."

When Bancroft died of cancer in 2005, Brooks says his father was undone. "He lost the love of his life and had to rebuild his life from scratch. He's an incredibly resilient person. We all look at him as a legend, but his life has not been easy: he's had crushing failures and crushing blows. He's never had one movie that was reviewed well. Critics hated him — they still hate him."

Despite his parents' encouragement he never wanted to follow in their acting footsteps. "I'm an introvert, I grew up in my room. I tried going out on auditions, but I despised it. Mom would say, 'You're so talented,' and I'd say, 'Mom, it's not talent, it's the will. You need both.'"

He thinks he takes after his mother more than his father. In fact, he looks like both of them: his father's mouth, often on the verge of laughter, his mother's Italian colouring and eyes. "Both were very charming and personable — but I think I am my mother's son when it comes to personalities. My dad is an extrovert at the core of his soul. My mother less so — although she was Italian so there was a lot of yelling; I could yell at her, she could yell at me. We never had that quiet resentment. Nothing freaks me out more than when my wife is quiet."

To this day he hates social events. "I always felt an expectation. I had to prove I was not just Mel Brooks's son — that was easy, the hard part was being Max Brooks."

After college, he wrote for *Saturday Night Live*, then started *The Zombie Survival Guide*. He first became intrigued by zombies after seeing a terrifying Italian cannibal zombie movie aged 12. And yes, he knows that zombies are not real, but he thinks they are a good metaphor for the world today.

"There's a sense of apocalyptic anxiety: post 9/11, global financial meltdown, international terrorism. What I love about zombies is they live by their own rules and you have to adapt to them. It's a great metaphor for life: adapting to a horrible boss or harsh working conditions."

Brooks's unconventional — and frankly brilliant — thinking has inspired the US military to seek his help in responding to crises. He speaks eloquently at military engagements and last year accepted a fellowship at the Modern War Institute at West Point.

He is running late for his father's birthday dinner so we walk out through his garden, where he proudly shows off his abundant tomato plants and his Japanese plum tree. Opening the garden gate, he looks up and down the alley before letting me out with an ominous caution: "Be very safe."

***Minecraft: The Island* by Max Brooks is published by Century, £12.99**

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