

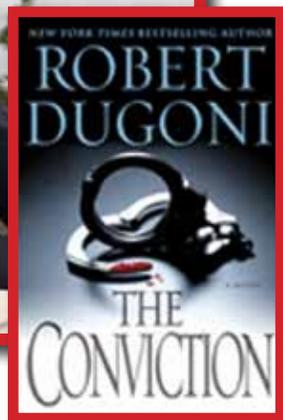
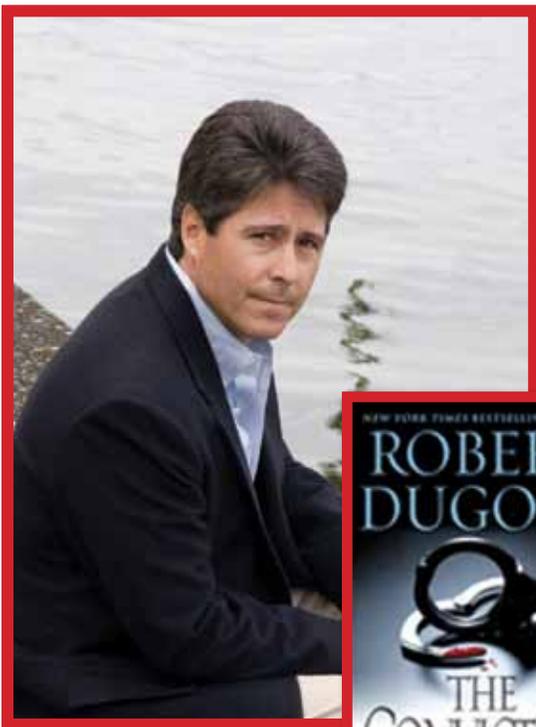


America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

Part III:

Robert Dugoni's Seven Deadly Sins of Writing

By Anthony J. Franze



In this series, author Anthony Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month, bestselling author Robert Dugoni discusses common mistakes made by new suspense writers. Next month, some of this year’s hottest debut authors give their “lessons learned”—rules of fiction that helped them get publishing deals.

In the movie *Seven*, a rookie cop played by Brad Pitt partners with a veteran detective as they hunt a serial killer who commits gruesome murders based on the Seven Deadly Sins. In the famous final scene, Pitt finds the severed head of his pretty wife (Gwyneth Paltrow) in a box. That prompts Pitt to gun down the killer, committing the seventh deadly sin: wrath. (Spoiler apology for those who are two decades behind with their movies).

For acclaimed legal thriller writer Robert Dugoni, there's a different set of deadly sins. Not greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, gluttony, or wrath, though many writers are no strangers to those. Dugoni's list of vices includes seven missteps new suspense writers make in crafting their stories—mistakes that are apt to leave manuscripts in the same sorry state as Gwyneth's head, torn apart and discarded in a box: an agent or publisher's wastebasket.

Dugoni, who the Associated Press recently called “one of the best thriller writers in the business,” knows of what he speaks. He's the author of seven critically acclaimed novels. His recent, “Murder One,” is a finalist for the prestigious Harper Lee Award for legal fiction

and was voted by the Library Journal as one of its top five thrillers in 2011. And his June 2012 release, “The Conviction,” has become an instant classic. I recently sat down with Dugoni and discussed his “seven deadly sins”:

Sin #1 Failing to Entertain.

Dugoni teaches writing and he often starts his class by asking, “What’s the primary function of a novelist?” Dugoni said the students typically “scratch their heads or make facial expressions like they’re solving a math problem” until he gives the answer: “We’re entertainers. We entertain. If we’re not doing that, we’re not doing our jobs.” Dugoni’s first cardinal sin, therefore, is failing to entertain. He focuses on things writers do that annoy, distract, or bore readers. Or, looking at it from a writer’s perspective, things that get agents and publishers to reject their work.

Dugoni said the most common mistakes he sees, and the easiest to remedy, are those where the writer takes the reader out of the story by providing too much information. A prime culprit is the “information dump.” Research shouldn’t bog down a story, but Dugoni said many authors have conducted years of detailed research and “damn it, everyone’s gonna know it.” Dugoni is not the only foe of the information dump. Last month, I noted one of David Baldacci’s core writing principles: “Do all the research you can possibly do and then leave most of it out while integrating what you do leave in so that it does not interrupt the story. We’re writing novels, not textbooks.”

Another common way writers fail to entertain is providing too much backstory, such as where the writer gives a three-page biography every time a new character enters a room. “Less is more,” is a first principle for Dugoni, “and writers should weave the relevant information into the story and let the readers fill in the gaps through their imaginations.”

Sin #2 Misuse of the Flashback.

“Many writers misuse the flashback,” Dugoni said. By their nature, flashbacks stop a story from moving forward, so they should be used sparingly. For Dugoni, writers should use them “only when they can give insights on character that are relevant to story or move the plot along.” The worst kind of flashback is where the writer has the character think back and recall something that happened (“I remember when...”). The best are where the writer shows what happened and makes the flashback its own scene. Bottom line: “If the flashback stops the story moving forward, it probably is a distraction and not worth it.”

Sin #3 Beginning the Chapter Too Early, Ending Too Late.

Dugoni said that too often less experienced scribes “write their way into the scene” by spelling out each thing that happened on the way to the action: “The alarm clock went off, he got up, took a shower, brushed his teeth, had breakfast, and found his wife dead in the living room.” Dugoni said that the place to begin that scene is where the character found his dead wife. “Anything that can be presumed, like the things we all do when we get out of bed, can be cut.”

Many writers end a scene too late, too. Dugoni said writers sometimes want to sum up what happened, perhaps out of insecurity that the reader didn’t get it. A newer author might write: “My boss looked up at me and said, ‘you’re fired.’ I then went to the office, packed my things in boxes, said goodbye to my co-workers, and went home.” The place to end was “you’re fired.” Everything else is clutter and doesn’t take into account the sophistication and experiences of the reader. In short, the writer “needs to begin and end with the action.”

Sin #4 Talking Your Way Into or Out of a Scene.

This is the ugly cousin of Sin #3 and occurs when the writer begins or ends a chapter with unnecessary dialogue rather than writing to the middle of the scene. The newer author might write:

“Hi, how are you?”

“Fine, how are you?”

“Good.”

“Nice weather.”

“Yes it is.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to the store.”

“Why?”

“I need bleach.”

“What for?”

“To clean up blood.”

The scene should begin with “I need bleach.” This example may seem exaggerated, Dugoni said, but he sees this type of extraneous dialogue often in the manuscripts he reviews.

All this is not to say that writers should always avoid their characters engaging in initial pleasantries. It may be worth doing if relevant to developing a character or the plot. He gave an example of a scene in which a character is going to talk to a bookie and notices the bookie has a picture of children on his desk: “You’ve got kids? They’re great. I’ve got three kids.” That may be effective if it has a purpose—showing the character trying to connect with the bookie. It can also show something about the bookie if he replies, “I don’t give a damn if you have kids, I want my money.” So, talking into the scene can be effective if it’s done with purpose. Otherwise, writers should do what we wish we could do in real life: cut out the small talk.

Sin #5 Failing to Adhere to Point-of-View.

Dugoni has noticed a more “relaxed” approach to point-of-view over the years. He said in some novels you see one chapter in first person, another in third person. “I’m not a fan of that,” Dugoni said, “but some people can pull it off. That’s not the problem.” The problem is where the writer changes the point-of-view in the scene. “It’s like a tennis match where the reader is following the ball back and forth, jumping from head to head.” The reader must know who is telling the story and the writer should not take readers into more than one character’s head at a time. Dugoni said the rule is simple: “one scene, one point-of-view.”

The writer can still show what another character is thinking, Dugoni said. “You just achieve that through what the point-of-view character observes.” For example, “John said, ‘I want a divorce.’ He *watched* his wife’s face go pale.” Don’t say “the crowd was surprised,” Dugoni advised. Say, “David *heard* the crowd gasp.”

Sin #6 Excessive Narrative or Inner Monologue.

The next capital sin is where the writer provides too much narrative or inner monologue of the characters. “This is the classic telling, not showing problem,” Dugoni said. Giving the character’s inner thoughts is rarely as interesting as the writer thinks. “It’s much more interesting to see or hear the characters do something.” But if you do it, Dugoni said, keep it short. And as with most rules of writing, there are exceptions: “In ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ we know Holden Caulfield’s every thought. But there was a purpose for it—he’s an unreliable narrator.”

Sin #7 Excessive Setting Description or Character Development.

Dugoni said that “a description of the setting needs to be relevant to the scene; if the scene involves the character hiking the Pacific Coast Trail to reflect, it is okay to tell us the type of trees and rocks; but not so if the character is running away from bad guys on the trail.” Again, it comes down to purpose—picking and choosing the right times to describe the setting and trusting readers to fill in the gaps.

The same is true with character description. “There’s this tendency,” Dugoni said, “to have a character enter a room and give a full physical description.” But that’s not what we do in real life. Rather, our impressions come slowly unless there’s something really striking about the person. “If a guy is on a blind date, he might notice the date showing up in a skirt slit up her leg or if a character has an out-of-the ordinary physical characteristic, but otherwise we rarely notice everything about a person—and that’s how we should write the scene.”

So new writers perfecting your craft take heed. Though committing one of Dugoni’s deadly sins won’t land you in one of the circles of the Inferno, ignoring the advice of this renowned storyteller could condemn you to a writer’s hell—the bad end of the slush pile (okay, that’s enough metaphors for this month, you get the idea). If you want to learn by example, pick up a copy of “The Conviction,” one of the best thrillers of 2012. ■

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