

America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

Part VI:

Seven Tips from Breakout Debut Thriller Writers

By Anthony J. Franze



In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month, some of the year’s hottest debut authors identify writing advice that helped them get publishing deals. Next month, #1 New York Times bestselling author Catherine Coulter gives her rules for writing sharp, fast, and deadly.

A professional writer, so the expression goes, is an amateur who didn’t quit. But anyone who’s tried to write a novel—much less get one published—knows that “never quitting,” though a popular sentiment, is much harder than it sounds. A first novel often is written in the wee hours, after a long day’s work, with family and friends scratching their heads (or rolling their eyes) about why *anyone* would spend their free time writing a story. And not just any story, but one that, odds are, few will ever read given the difficulties of breaking into the publishing world.

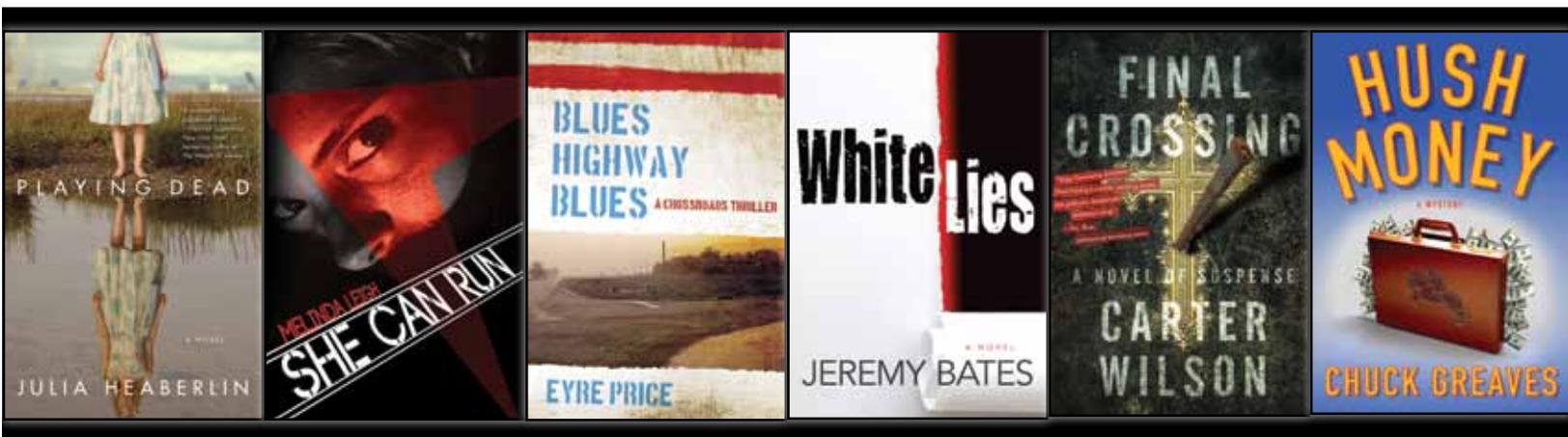
At this year’s ThrillerFest—the annual conference held by the International Thriller Writers (ITW)—the organization celebrated writers who didn’t quit: ITW’s 2012 Debut Authors (I am proud to be one of them). The debut authors I met at ThrillerFest managed not only to finish their novels, but to secure critical acclaim, multi-book deals, foreign sales, and movie options. Given their successes, and in light of this writing series, I asked these rising stars to share the rules or advice that helped them beat the odds.

Just Write:

“The most significant piece of advice I got was from Stephen King’s masterful little book “On Writing,” ” said **Julia Heaberlin**, author of the acclaimed “Playing Dead.” King basically advised that if you’re waiting for the perfect time in your life to write, or for a perfectly appointed serene writing space, you’ll never be a writer. After reading that, Heaberlin immediately sat down at her kitchen table and began to write. “The day I wrote in a urologist’s office was the day I knew that I was, officially, a writer.”

“Writing is more discipline than inspiration,” agreed **Melinda Leigh**, author of the stunning “She Can Run,” a 2012 ITW nominee for Best First Novel. “Writing a thousand words a day will yield a 90,000-word rough draft in approximately three months. Five hundred words (that’s just two pages!) a day? It’ll take you six months. But you’ll finish it. Guaranteed.”

But it isn’t just about sitting down to write. “You have to write like you’re never going to get another chance,” said **Eyre Price**. He got that bit of wisdom not from another writer, but from a legendary bluesman, and used it to craft his superb and



soulful “Blues Highway Blues.” Price explained that “if there’s no passion in writing the words, there won’t be any in reading them.”

Kill Your Darlings:

Like Julia Heaberlin, several of the debut authors identified Stephen King’s “On Writing” as a source of inspiration and writing advice. In the book, King tells writers to ruthlessly edit their work: “Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart, kill your darlings.” That’s a principle **Jeremy Bates** followed when writing the white-hot “White Lies.” “Don’t be shy with the delete key,” urged Bates. “If I think that maybe a sentence or a paragraph or even a chapter doesn’t fit, it probably doesn’t—and I don’t feel bad deleting it. Only once it’s gone do I often realize how completely unnecessary it was in the first place.”

Carter Wilson likewise said that writers can’t be afraid to cut or even change aspects of the story. “Don’t treat your manuscripts as holy objects. Listen to your agent and your editor, and be prepared to make changes.” For his stellar “Final Crossing,” Wilson found that comments from his agent “completely opened my eyes to the flow of a book, and my writing has tightened to a staccato pace.”

But knowing *when* to start polishing is just as important. **Chuck Greaves** wished he’d understood this principle when he started writing his award-winning “Hush Money.” Greaves said that he “sweated over every sentence” as he wrote, resulting in a manuscript that ran nearly double its target length. When it came time to start editing, he nearly wept as his gleaming prose went fluttering to the cutting-room floor. “When writing “Green-Eyed Lady,” the first sequel to “Hush Money,” I satisfied myself that each chapter was good enough, then moved on, leaving perfection for the editing process. I wept less, and finished the book in nearly half the time.”

Write Atmosphere:

“Space, light and texture.” **Nancy Bilyeau** recalls this advice from her screenwriting teacher whenever she writes a scene. When she crafted her historical thriller “The Crown,” which was on the short list for the prestigious Ellis Peters Historical Dagger Award, Bilyeau “weaved in details on what it looks and sounds and smells like to be my character in 1537-1538 England.” Reviews have singled out the vivid description as what sets the novel apart.

For **James Tabor**, author of the absorbing “The Deep Zone,” the key to good description is to go beyond helping readers see, hear, taste, feel, or smell. He said the point was best made by the late Raymond Chandler, whom he quoted: “The things [readers] remembered, that haunted them, were not for example that a man got killed but that in the moment of his death he was trying to pick up a paper clip off the polished surface of a desk and it kept slipping away from him.”

Make Them Believe:

According to **Lissa Price**, author of the breakout international bestseller “Starters,” writers need to hook readers with a

“believable, enticing world with a character that feels real.” Dean Koontz loved this dystopian thriller that has teens renting out their bodies to seniors to be young again. Price advises writers to “gather up your courage, go full on and climb inside the head and skin of your characters.” **Donna Galanti** adhered to a similar principle when writing “A Human Element,” which bestselling author MJ Rose called “a riveting debut.” Galanti’s editor advised that “to keep the fiction dream alive we need to have readers suspend disbelief—and *never* show our underpants.” What that means, Galanti said, is that writers “must create a world in which a plot point can happen. Don’t create an event just to ‘show’ something. Readers don’t want a world where stuff happens like in real life.” They want a world where even if the character didn’t see it coming—they did.

Brian Andrews makes his characters believable by remembering that “characters are motivated by self-interest.” In writing his gripping “The Calypso Directive” (featured last month as a *Suspense Magazine* sneak peek), Andrews said, “I consistently reminded myself that my characters are *not* me. They should not behave as I would behave in a given situation, rather they should behave according to how their self-interest influences their perception of the world around them.”

To bring authenticity to the characters in her exceptional “Living Proof,” **Kira Peikoff** followed one simple tip: “Don’t write dialogue that is ‘on the nose.’ People don’t always say exactly what they mean. It is the subtext of their conversation, their gestures and expressions that often provide the real meaning.”

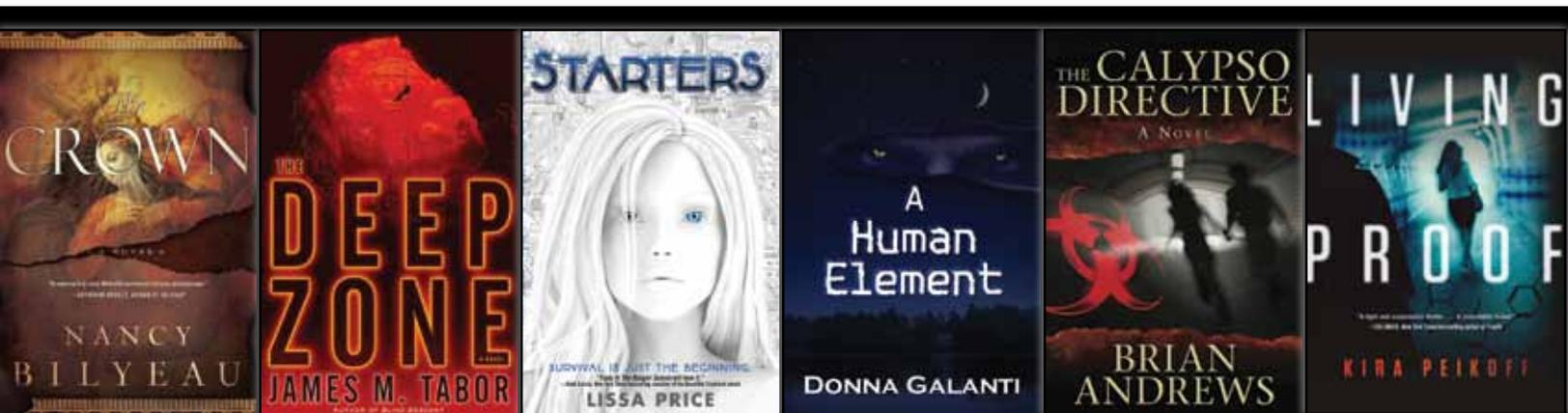
Go Emotion or Go Home:

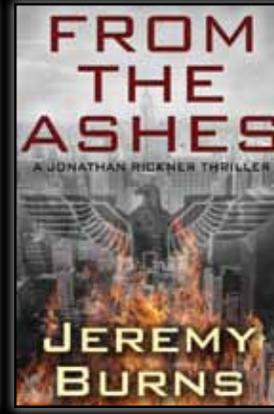
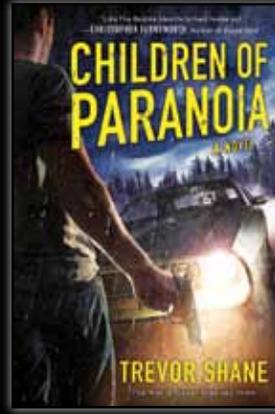
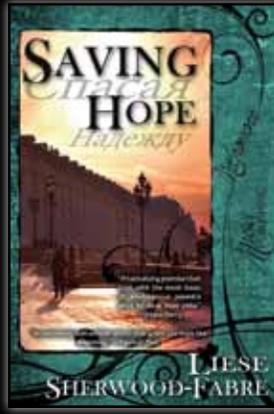
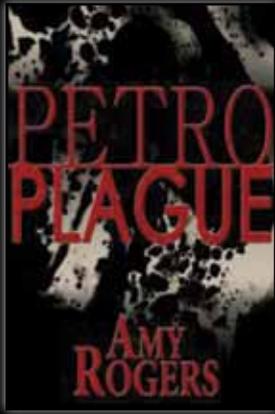
“Make me fall in love with a character, make me want what she wants and see the world as she sees it, and I’ll be tied up in knots if she so much as loses her car keys,” said **Amy Rogers**. “Suspense doesn’t require a terrorist attack, viral pandemic, or conspiracy,” she said. Rather, what draws readers in is the emotional investment. That’s not to say that Rogers disavows a thrilling premise. In her haunting “Petroplague,” oil-eating bacteria threatens civilization. “But my writing rule is to remember that ever-bigger threats by themselves don’t hook the reader. Only an emotional bond with the characters can do that.”

Liese Sherwood-Fabre said she also focuses on the emotional connection between the reader and the characters. She had a “light bulb moment” after reading Sol Stein’s description of how one writer created an emotional connection between her main character and readers. “In the opening scene, the character observes her nightly ritual of patting her sleeping son’s head before leaving to work as a police decoy. Throughout the rest of the book, Stein points out, readers remember this woman as a loving mother with a small child waiting for her at home, and any danger she faces is heightened because of this emotional attachment.” That advice, and a tip from her creative writing professor about putting child characters in peril, were the genesis of her emotionally rich “Saving Hope.”

Give Them A Reason to Turn the Page:

“Always give your readers a reason to read the next page,” said **Trevor Shane**, author of the outstanding “Children of Paranoia.” Shane said there’s a transaction between reader and writer: Readers give the writer a piece of their lives, and the writer gives them a reason to turn the page. How do you make them want to turn the page? “That’s the art,” he said. “Ask questions to which your reader wants to learn the answers. Foreshadow something thrilling so that your reader needs to get to it. Make





characters so great that your reader simply wants to spend more time with them to see how things are going to turn out for them. Or do something totally unique and surprising so that your reader simply wants to see what you are going to do next.” But no matter what, “do something on every single page.”

Break the Rules:

I’ve previously written about authors who break the rules (July *Suspense Magazine* Part II in series) and at this year’s ThrillerFest, Lee Child taught a course on just that. So it probably shouldn’t come as a surprise that a couple 2012 debut authors preach caution about “the rules.” Like Child, **Jeremy Burns** is skeptical of some conventional writing rules, such as “write what you know.” Burns said, “What you know could be very, very boring. A better adage would be to write what you are passionate about.” Burns is passionate about history so, naturally, his killer debut “From the Ashes” is a historical conspiracy. For **Jeff Wilson**, rules can be detrimental because “by the time they are all heard, absorbed, catalogued and incorporated a writer can find him or herself utterly paralyzed and unable to recall just what the hell it is they wanted to write, or why.” When writing his knockout “The Traiteur’s Ring,” Wilson followed the advice from a fellow writer: “Don’t worry so damn much about someone else’s rules and write like yourself.”

Each one of these authors was once an unknown amateur, struggling to write five hundred words a day at the kitchen table or doctor’s office or God knows where else. Now, they’re “writers”—rising stars in the suspense genre. They didn’t quit. And here’s to you not quitting either. ■

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