

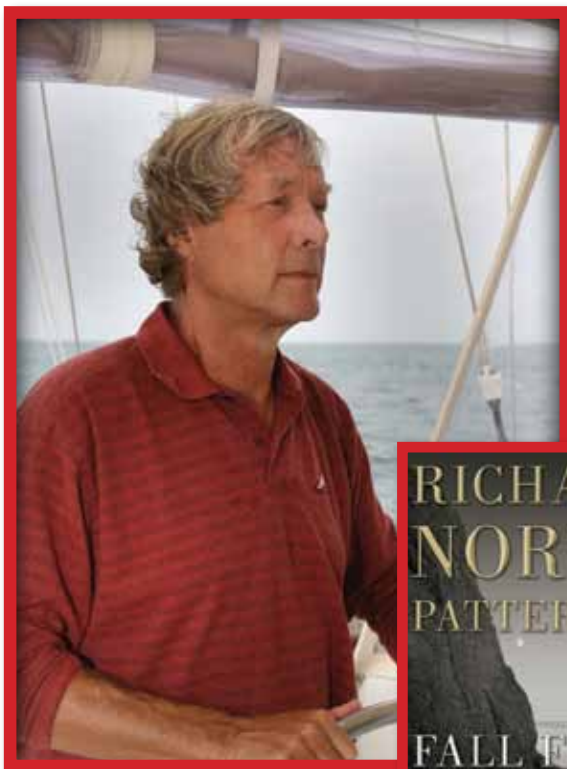


America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

Richard North Patterson and the Writing Process

By Anthony J. Franze

Photo Credit (Richard North Patterson): Peter Simon



In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month, New York Times bestselling author Richard North Patterson shares his writing process. Next month, Anthony kicks off the new year with Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child.

Richard North Patterson is one of the most acclaimed authors in the country. A legend who’s sold more than twenty million books. A source of awe and inspiration to writers, particularly fellow lawyers-turned-authors like me.

But he’s also a hard interview for this series.

This is “America’s favorite suspense authors on the rules of fiction,” but Patterson doesn’t view himself as a suspense author, and he rejects the notion of hard-and-fast rules of suspense. Categorizing novels, Patterson said, diminishes them in the minds of perspective readers. He explained that his upcoming novel, “Loss of Innocence”—the prequel to his stunning “Fall From Grace”—is a coming-of-age story set in 1968. “It’s suspenseful, but I wouldn’t call it a suspense novel or me a suspense writer. I’m a novelist. Period.”

As for the rules, Patterson said that “after twenty years as a full-time writer, I never think in terms of devices or rules, I just

write.” And he gets annoyed with writers who suggest there are “one-size-fits-all rules to writing.” Nevertheless, he agreed to talk with me about his writing process—how he approaches his work—with the hope that aspiring writers might find something helpful in the routine and habits of a twenty-two-book veteran. And, indeed, there’s great wisdom in his method:

Don’t wait for inspiration; set a schedule and write. Patterson sits down at seven a.m., writes in the morning and edits in the afternoon, five days a week. “To paraphrase Woody Allen, sometimes success is just about showing up. If you want to be a writer, you need to make a commitment to write regularly on a schedule that fits your life.” If you write just five pages a week, Patterson said, you’ll have two hundred and sixty pages at the end of the year.

Most important: “Don’t wait to get inspired.” Patterson said that artistic inspiration is illusory. Patterson said he’s not inspired every time he sits down to write, but he still forces himself to do it. “And some of my best work happens when I feel like I’m just trudging through. If you wait for inspiration, you’ll likely never finish the book.”

Don’t try and outguess the marketplace. Before putting pen to paper (Patterson writes in longhand) Patterson spends most of his time preparing to write. “Thinking, researching, and outlining take longer than actually writing the book,” he said.

The first thing he does is think: “I sit in a quiet place and I conceptualize the story. I think through a logical narrative in which the events could occur, taking into account the personalities and motivations of the characters.” What’s important, he said, is what he doesn’t think about: “I don’t think about what’s trendy, cool, or what might sell.” When the writer tries to outguess the market in search of a salable idea, he said, “it gets away from the storytelling and becomes an artificial calculation that readers will see through.” Write what interests you, what excites you. Write something you’d want to read. But don’t write with an eye at the perceived market.

Immerse yourself in the world you’re creating. Once the story starts to take shape in his mind, Patterson throws himself into research. “Authenticity is key. For me, it’s like method acting. Before writers can make a convincing world, they need to inhabit that world and the characters who live there.”

Patterson’s research has taken him from Washington, D.C. to Nigeria; from Martha’s Vineyard to the West Bank; from interviewing a president of the United States to a wanted terrorist. He usually conducts more than fifty interviews for a single novel.

He acknowledged that “most people don’t write full-time for a living, so they need to objectively assess their situation—write within their circumstances.” He added, “I couldn’t have written ‘Exile’ when I started out because I had a full-time job as a lawyer and couldn’t just drop everything and travel to Israel. But I could have written ‘Degree of Guilt’ while working because I knew the subject matter and had access to people who were knowledgeable, like cops and defense lawyers. You have to work with your circumstances.”

Outline and know how the story ends. After Patterson completes his research, he studiously outlines the story. “Every scene is in a folder. In the folder is an outline and research notes for that scene. Each folder is for a chapter and they are in order. I’ve basically pre-written the book.” Patterson said this technique allows things to change as he writes, but the outline provides structure and security. “It is very much like when I was a lawyer,” he said. “I was a big case litigator and needed to take messy



facts over years and organize them into an understandable narrative.”

Outlining, he said, prevents him from going on “frolics” when he writes. “Because of the outline, I’ve never had to scrap large sections of a manuscript.” An important part of his process is knowing how the story ends. Knowing the resolution is needed for plot consistency and for the behavior of the characters. A tacked-on ending or a character acting in an unbelievable way can bring down a good story, he said. “It’s great to surprise your reader, but a sin to surprise yourself.”

Writing is rewriting. Working through his folders and completing the initial draft is just the beginning for Patterson. “Writing is rewriting,” he said, and Patterson spends much of his time editing. Writers need to deepen characters, tighten the prose, and intensify the scenes. His best advice to newer writers, he admitted, is not new: “Kill your darlings. Realize that every sentence is not sacred. Many writers have a first draft that is eighty percent there, but the unwillingness or inability to change it prevents them from getting published.”

Patterson cautioned that his process works for him, but a writer needs to find his or her own way. And the rules? His advice is simple: Don’t get too caught up in them. “What gets me up in the morning is writing about something that gets me excited, characters that I’d be interested to read about, and the goal that when I finish I can be really proud of the book.” ■

Anthony J. Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm and author of the debut legal thriller, “The Last Justice.” In addition to his writing and law practice, he is an adjunct professor of law, has been a commentator for Bloomberg, the National Law Journal and other news outlets, and is a contributing editor for the Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children.

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