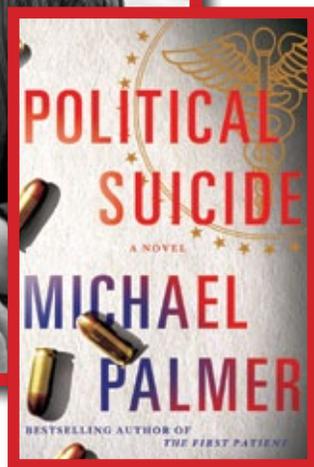
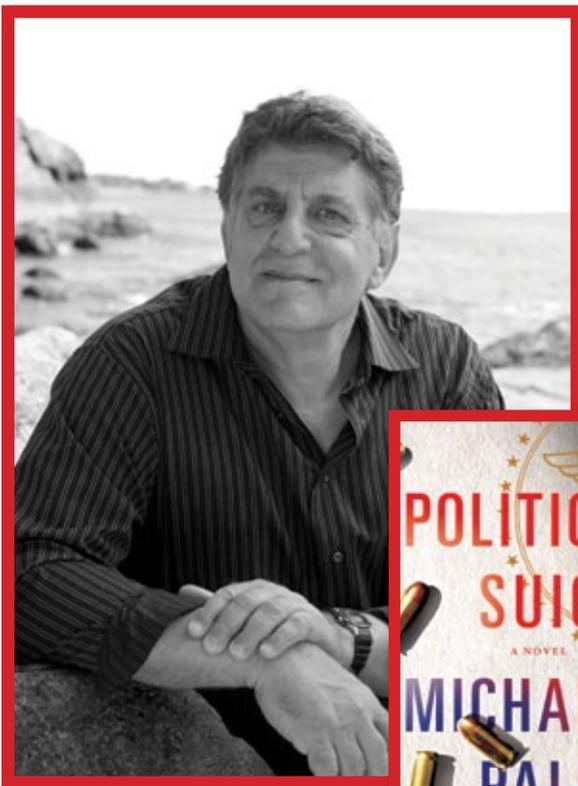




America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

HOW TO MAKE RHINO STEW: MICHAEL PALMER'S 10 STEPS TO WRITING A THRILLER



By Anthony J. Franze

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In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. For the next few months, Anthony will profile authors who will teach at this summer’s CraftFest, the International Thriller Writers’ writing school held during the organization’s annual ThrillerFest conference. Michael Palmer kicks things off with his ten steps to writing a thriller.

With eighteen *New York Times* bestselling novels under his belt, Dr. Michael Palmer long ago earned the title, “King of Medical Suspense.” Weaving in cutting-edge medicine, interesting characters, and experiences from his twenty years as an internal and emergency medicine practitioner, Palmer’s novels are always sophisticated page-turners. And his latest, “Political Suicide,” proves again why Palmer is considered not only a master of suspense, but also a skilled surgeon in the craft of writing.

Despite his success, Palmer recently told me that the idea of starting a new book could still intimidate him. After years of anxiety about facing the blank page, Palmer said, his physician’s instinct for “process” kicked in and he decided to develop a framework—ten steps—for writing a thriller. If

you're curious just how well Palmer's ten steps work, consider this: the three people with the most exposure to Palmer and his writing tips—Palmer's sons—are in line to be the next generation of literary royalty. Daniel Palmer already is an acclaimed multi-book success writing cyber suspense for Kensington. Matt Palmer, a political officer in the U.S. Foreign Service, just signed a two-book deal with Putnam for his diplomatic thrillers. And Luke Palmer, still in college, writes successful plays, comedy sketches, and musicals. Perhaps writing is in their DNA. But I suspect Dad's ten steps played a role. So here they are:

STEP 1: FIND A RHINO. “Find a what?” I said to Palmer. He explained that years ago a reporter asked him how he begins the daunting task of writing a novel. “I hadn't really thought about it, but off the top of my head came: I would imagine it's like following a recipe for rhinoceros stew that begins, First, find a rhino.” In other words, find out what you want to write about—the big idea that defines your book. A virus, post-traumatic stress disorder, the assassination of Supreme Court justices, whatever. The key is to find, wherever you can, that rhino. (Incidentally, the rhino has taken on a life of its own—people now give Palmer rhino figurines and he has a vast collection.)

STEP 2: CHOOSING YOUR “WHAT IF?” This is essentially the writer's elevator pitch for the novel. It's a pithy answer to the question, “What's your book about?” The response should be carefully crafted, twenty-five words or less, and no more than two sentences. For example, the “What if?” for Palmer's novel, “The Patient” was *What if the most ruthless, mysterious, remorseless terrorist in the world had a brain tumor and needed surgery?* For “Political Suicide”: *What if a military scientist created a drug that could biochemically block the ability to fear?* Writing the “What if?” doesn't just help with pitching the book, Palmer said. It also helps writers stay focused when they start writing. Palmer began drafting “What ifs?” for all of his books after learning the technique from a Maui Writers Conference course taught by John Saul and Michael Sack.

STEP 3: KNOW YOUR MCGUFFIN. The “McGuffin”—a term of questionable origin, but popularized by Alfred Hitchcock—is a difficult concept to explain, but Palmer said it basically is the answer to the “What if?” question. The example often used to illustrate the concept, Palmer explained, is Hitchcock's “North by Northwest,” in which bad guys are chasing Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint on a train. “At some point halfway through the movie Hitchcock came up with the reason they were after Grant. It didn't really make a difference what it was as long as it made reasonable sense.” The same is true with a thriller: “Most people think they are reading thrillers to find out the explanation for what's going on in the story—the McGuffin—but the truth is that they keep reading because the author has led them to care about the characters and what happens to them.” A McGuffin is something you should have to start your book, but once you have it, you can set it aside. And you can even change it anytime you want if you come up with a better one. But you should try your best to begin with one.

STEP 4: “WHOSE BOOK IS IT?” Once you have the “What if?” and the McGuffin squared away, the next step is to determine who will be the protagonist. Picking the main character, Palmer noted, is key to the success of the book. There's a simple way to identify your protagonist: “The book belongs to the person who has the most at stake.” For instance, “one of my books was about infertility, so naturally the main character had to be a woman with fertility problems.” It's not always that easy, he said, but the “What if?” often points you in the direction of the type of person who would have the most



at stake—the most to lose—in the story.

STEP 5: IDENTIFY THE CONFLICT. Once you identify the main character, “determine what or who he or she will push up against.” Conflict, Palmer said, is the driving force behind all fiction. “Conflict between the main character and other characters, conflict between the main character and what’s going on in the story, and conflict between the character and herself.” Again, readers often think they are turning the pages because they want to know the ending, but they really continue because they care about the characters and want to know the resolution of the characters’ conflicts. “Think: conflict, catharsis (change within the characters), resolution.”

STEP 6: PLOT THE MIDDLE. Palmer said that once you’ve completed the first five steps, writing the beginning of a book should come naturally. Likewise, “some endings are better than others, but they’re usually not hard to find.” The middle, though, is “the most difficult part of writing a thriller.” Palmer said it requires “ingenuity, imagination, and time”—and usually one or more subplots. Step Six, therefore, is to figure out your subplots. Creating interesting secondary characters is just one way to do it. Outlining, he said, helps. Palmer used to draft a detailed outline of the entire book before he started writing. But now he outlines the first few chapters and then outlines about five chapters at a time. “I find I’m more light on my feet if I don’t know everything that will happen along the way.” The trick, Palmer said, is that you need to prop up the middle so it doesn’t drag everything else down. “You don’t want the center of the book to drop like the belly of an aging horse.”

STEP 7: SET UP THE ENDING. Palmer said once you know your subplots and the center of the book, “you need to tighten the screws” so readers move toward the climax. Palmer likes to think of his stories as dropping an everyday person into a cauldron of bubbling water and nailing the lid shut so that the person’s only way out is through the plot. Palmer tries to toss in one obstacle after another, culminating in a set up for the ending where all seems lost . . . until it isn’t.

STEP 8: THE CLIMAX. This can be short or long. It can be a surprise ending, something exciting, something unusual. But a thriller should have a climax—a sequence of events each more intense than the last (Step Seven) that culminate in a conclusion to those events. Unpredictability is the key. If you’re not nodding your head and exclaiming, “Yeah!” you need to keep trying.

STEP 9: PROLOGUE? After you complete the first eight steps, you need to circle back to the beginning and consider whether the book needs a prologue. Palmer recognized that some writers shun the prologue. But he likes them. “Why? Because they’re a great way to start the book fast. You can put your energy and hook into the prologue, which means you won’t have to start the story hot on Chapter One, you can ease up on the throttle a bit.”

STEP 10: EPILOGUE? You should finally evaluate whether the novel needs an epilogue. The question to ask here is how much do you want or need to wrap things up? “Readers tend to want resolution of most of the big issues and you don’t want to leave things hanging in a way that is unpleasant for them.” Sometimes just a short “where are they now” works, particularly if the plot takes place over a short time frame. Palmer often prefers, however, epilogues that wrap up core issues but suggest that “evil lives on.”

Palmer acknowledged that writing a novel, like cooking rhino stew, is not a simple task. “When I teach, I tell my students to put two signs on their desks when they’re writing. One says, ‘THIS IS HARD,’ because they shouldn’t forget it—if it were easy, everyone would do it. The second reads, ‘BE FEARLESS,’ because I want them not to fear criticism and just to go for it.”

Anthony J. Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm and the 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 features editor for the Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children. Learn more about Anthony at <http://www.anthonyfranzebooks.com/> ■