



America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

JOHN'S RUN: JOHN GILSTRAP ON WRITING

By Anthony J. Franze

Photo Credit: Kensington Publishing



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 are teaching at this summer’s CraftFest, the International Thriller Writers’ writing school held during the organization’s annual ThrillerFest conference. This month, New York Times bestselling author John Gilstrap shares his advice.

In the mid-1990s, John Gilstrap published his breakthrough thriller, “Nathan’s Run.” Today, nearly twenty years and more than a dozen acclaimed books later—including the brilliant “Damage Control”—Gilstrap’s views on the “rules” of writing haven’t changed much:

“THERE ARE NO RULES.”

That, of course, could make for an exceptionally short segment in this series. But when we spoke recently, Gilstrap explained that what he means is that writers need to stop obsessing about someone else’s version of “the rules.” Instead, he said, “Sit down and write—tell the story in the voice that you’d tell it to a friend sitting at your dining room table. Try to capture that voice on the page without worrying about the rules.” Gilstrap said that it



was not until he realized this (after writing three novels that he never submitted for publication) that he was ready to write “Nathan’s Run.”

His caveats about the rules aside, Gilstrap does believe there are good “suggestions” about writing that newer scribes should consider. He shared a few he’s learned during his long career:

“GET TO IT.” Gilstrap said that for thrillers, the writer needs to “get to it”—get to the conflict or action in each scene as quickly as possible. This is Gilstrap’s version of Hitchcock’s rule for storytelling: “Drama is life with the dull parts left out.” He described a recent example of reading a beautifully written manuscript where the scene involved terrorists bursting into a shopping mall and taking hostages. “The first seven pages of the scene described the color of the female protagonist’s shoes, her coffee order, what she was reading on her laptop, and other irrelevant details. It wasn’t until page eight that we met the terrorists. The prose was exceptional, but the story suffered because the writer buried the lead.” Write to the middle—bring in those terrorists on page one or two—and cut out the extraneous stuff.

KILL UNNEEDED CHARACTERS. One exercise Gilstrap conducts is to ask whether each character he’s introduced is needed to move the story forward. “If they don’t have enough to do, they shouldn’t be characters.” If the character appears only once or twice or offers only a small piece of information needed to move the story along, consider whether another character can carry the load. If so, remove the unneeded character from the story. “In ‘Lord of the Flies’ William Golding did this masterfully. He managed to create a crowd of kids while focusing really on only a couple essential characters.”

KNOW THE BEGINNING AND END, OUTLINE THE MIDDLE. Gilstrap acknowledged that authors differ on whether to outline before writing. Some authors draft outlines that go on for hundreds of pages, others write by the seat of their pants. Gilstrap’s preference is to know the beginning and end of the story, but loosely outline the middle. “If you don’t know the beginning and end, you don’t know where you’re writing to. I treat the story as a three-act structure with the greatest challenge being the second act, so I spend more time outlining the middle.” This is one where Gilstrap again urged writers to do what works for them.

ELIMINATE PASSIVE VOICE. I asked Gilstrap to identify the one problem he sees most often in manuscripts of newer writers. He didn’t hesitate: passive voice. “This is basic advice, I know. But it is also the most common issue I see. Writers should scour their manuscripts to eliminate passive voice. Active voice speeds the pace and makes the fear, action, and suspense more vivid for the reader.”

LISTEN TO FEEDBACK. “I’ve never had a case where receiving an editor’s notes is fun.” At the same time, Gilstrap said he’s never had a book that didn’t benefit from those notes. “Listen to feedback from those who take the time to read your manuscript, including writing instructors, your family and friends, and your agent.” He’s often astonished that many newer writers “are so in love with their own talent that they take any feedback as the reader not ‘getting it.’”



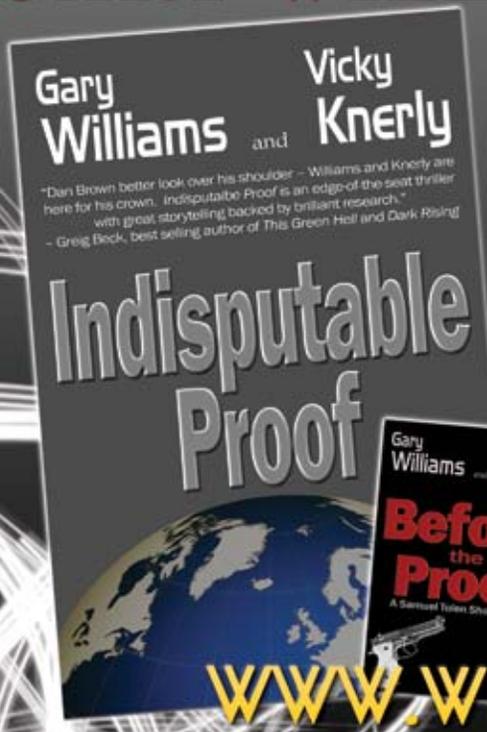
LIMIT PROFANITY. Tongue planted firmly in cheek, Gilstrap said, “I’m pretty [expletive] profane and I [expletive] think profanity is [expletive] fine when I’m talking to my friends. I worked at a [expletive] fire department, so it doesn’t bother me.” But he learned that profanity *does* bother his readers. He’s heard from many of them about it. So, a few years ago he decided to stop using profanity in his work. “My job as a writer is to entertain. Profanity was distracting from that, so I stopped—well, mostly stopped. I don’t think any of my characters or stories have suffered from the lack of four-letter words.”

DECONSTRUCT A FAVORITE NOVEL. Gilstrap personally has never found how-to writing guides useful, though he did find some inspiration in the personal anecdotes in Steven King’s “On Writing.” Gilstrap thinks a more useful exercise is reading and analyzing a favorite thriller. “I think ‘The Day of the Jackal’ is the perfect thriller. I read it several times and I started to see how Forsyth built suspense by his pacing, his chapter breaks, his character introductions. It was then that I ‘got it.’ I’m not saying copy someone else’s work, but for me studying a favorite novel really helped me develop my understanding of how to craft a thriller.” Here, Gilstrap is not alone. In January’s article in this series, Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child offered similar advice. (*Suspense*, Jan. 2013/Vol. 042).

While these suggestions have worked for him, Gilstrap said that the best advice he can give to new writers is that few writing careers follow a straight line. Before you’ve sold your first novel, rejection is more common than not. And after you’ve had a little success, “you’re still always one departing editor or one bad book away from failure.” It is easy to succumb to discouragement, but remember: “Failure has to be declared by the writer, it cannot be inflicted by a third party. As long as you keep writing, you’re always in the game.” ■

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.anthonfranzebooks.com/>

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