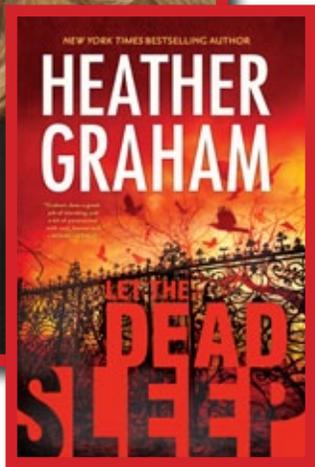




America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

READ, WRITE, LIVE, LISTEN: HEATHER GRAHAM ON WRITING

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 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 Heather Graham shares her advice.

Heather Graham is one of those rare authors who is so prolific that she’s not sure how many books she’s published since her first novel sold in 1982. “Like the saying goes, ‘You’re only as good as your last book,’ so I’ve never seen the point in counting them all up.” I looked into it and she’s written more than one hundred novels with seventy-five million books in print. She’s also won more than twenty trade and literary awards. Fans devour anything and everything she pens, including her latest page-turner, “Let the Dead Sleep.”

On the rules of writing, Graham recently told me that she thinks writers do a disservice when they suggest there’s only one set of rules or one “right way” to do it. “There’s no magic bullet. If there was, everyone would be on the best-seller list.” She said that the most she or any author can do is explain what worked for them. So, what has worked for this remarkable writer who’s had success in multiple genres, including suspense, historical romance, time travel, occult, and horror?

Graham boils it down to four basics: read, write, listen, and live.

READ. Graham said that all of the successful writers she knows have something in common: they're all avid readers. Reading, she said, keeps you in touch with what you love about a good book, which in turn, puts you in a position to write one. "The point is not to read a book and say 'I can do better than that awful book.' Rather, the point is to find a great book and say, 'This is the kind of story I'm going to write.'" That of course doesn't mean to imitate or copy other writers, but simply to be inspired and to remember what it's like to fall in love with a great book. In short, "don't write if you don't read."

WRITE. Graham recognized that there are many variations of this advice—"plant butt to chair and keep it there," "just do it," and the like. She's a strong believer in discipline. Don't wait until you feel like writing, don't wait for inspiration, and don't wait until you have a perfect little space to write. Find a schedule that fits your life and put words on the page. "If you write just a page a day, in a year you'll have three-hundred-sixty-five pages." Graham credits her five children as the source of her own discipline. Five kids required time management. It also required her to become accustomed to writing amid the noise. ("I was never bothered by the noise, it's when they were quiet that I got concerned.") Because of her kids, she said, "I can now write anywhere. It's like Dr. Seuss: I can write in a car, in a bar, on a train, in the rain." No excuses, she said. Write.

LIVE. Though putting your butt in a chair is important, Graham said that the writer shouldn't forget to live. Authors who hunker down and do nothing but write stifle their creativity and their work. Visit friends and family, travel, have fun. And for suspense novelists, stay up on the news, since many great ideas are spawned from a newspaper story or a television news segment. "Writing at its core is about the human experience," she said, "so you need to live." For instance, Graham travels extensively, and because her books include paranormal thrillers, she learns the ghost stories of every town she visits.

LISTEN. Graham said that writers need to learn to listen to advice, but also know when to throw out advice. She's found that many, but not all, newer writers are resistant to feedback. "If an editor suggests changes, I listen. The editor is a professional and his or her goal is to make it a better book. If I strongly disagree with a suggestion, I've never had a publisher force me to change the book. But I certainly treat an editor's notes seriously." For newer scribes, she suggests getting into a critique group and keeping their minds open to criticism.

At the same time, writers need to be prepared to disregard some advice. Graham said that writing, like any art form, is subjective and two different people often have conflicting opinions about a book. "It's a hard balancing act to be open to criticism while knowing that you can't please everyone. One editor may say the plot is cliché, while another may find the book completely original. You can't write for everyone so you have to balance what advice to take and what advice to ignore, which is not always easy." That circles back to reading. If you're a voracious reader, she said, you'll have a sense of what audience you're after. And when in doubt, Graham said to always remember: "It's your work. Be true to yourself." ■

Anthony J. Franze is the author of the debut legal thriller, "The Last Justice." In addition to his writing, Anthony is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm and an adjunct professor of law. Anthony is active in the International Thriller Writers association where he Co-Chairs ITW's Debut Authors Program and is the Assistant Managing 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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