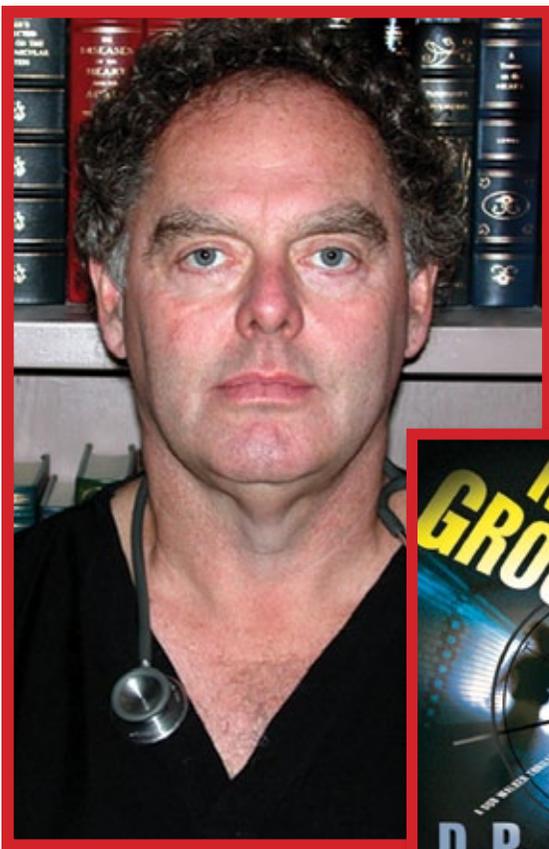




America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

THE DOCTOR IS IN: WRITING ADVICE FROM D.P. LYLE

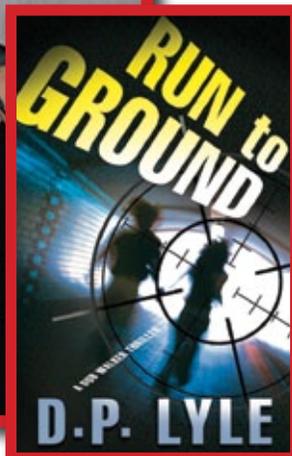
By Anthony J. Franze
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In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month Anthony interviews D.P. Lyle, the award-winning author and go-to man in Hollywood and Thrillerdom for advice on forensics and fiction. Next month, Anthony sits down with Sandra Brown.

D.P. Lyle, M.D. is no stranger to thriller writers. He literally wrote the book on forensics and fiction, he co-hosts a radio show (with Jan Burke) on *Suspense's* own Crime and Science Radio, and he's been consulting with authors on medical and forensic science for the last fifteen years. And, of course, there's his award-winning novels, including his latest page-turner, “Run to Ground.”

I caught up with the cardiologist/author/consultant recently, but not to talk about traceless poisons or blood spatter or the nuisances of DNA collection, but rather, his other area of expertise: writing. Lyle is a frequent lecturer on the craft, including classes on plotting, character, voice, and story structure. I asked him to share his top five pieces of advice.





1 APPLY “BUM GLUE.”

Lyle said the best advice he can give is that “as a writer you have to write.” Not think about writing or wait for the “perfect” time or mood to write. Just sit down and write. Lyle said that this advice was best put by the late Bryce Courtenay. “The great Australian writer used to say that writing requires one thing—bum glue. Glue your bum to the chair and write.”

Lyle meets a lot of would-be writers at conferences and he’s found that often people want to be a writer, but not necessarily want to write. “If you don’t enjoy putting words on a page or don’t enjoy sitting alone spinning a tale, find something else to do.”

Lyle practices what he preaches. He does not have a set schedule for when he writes because “I want to do it whenever I can.” It is important to write often (every day if possible), Lyle said, because it hones the writer’s skill and keeps the momentum of the story moving. Lyle said he has a sign on his computer that reads, “There’s no perfect time to write, only now.”

2 FOCUS ON THE ART FIRST, THEN THE CRAFT.

“Writing is both art and craft,” Lyle said. “The art part is telling the story; the craft is making the sentences sing and cleaning up the prose.” Often writers lose the art by focusing too much on the craft, he said. “They should sit down and tell the story like they would to a buddy at a bar and not get sidetracked making it perfect as they go.”

Lyle said many good stories are never finished because the writer prematurely focuses on making things perfect before the writer gets the story out. “The writer should write fast and get the story down without stopping—you can fix things later.” Lyle outlines his stories and then just writes without worrying about the details or stopping to correct things or clean up the prose. He may go back occasionally to correct a minor plot point that changed along the way, but he otherwise writes from beginning to end without looking back. “If the writer focuses too much on making it perfect, the book will never get done or the story will suffer.”

3 FOLLOW TERRY BROOKS’S 10 RULES.

Lyle said he also believes strongly in fantasy author Terry Brooks’s ten rules of writing:

Read, read, read.

Outline, outline, outline.

Write, write, write.

Repeat.

“Brooks is a great writer and gifted teacher, and this sums it all up.” Lyle particularly agrees with the emphasis on “read, read, read.”



“In medicine you learn through an apprenticeship; you learn from people who know more than you do and who have more experience than you do. Writing is no different. But the masters for your apprenticeship are located at your library, your bookstore, your Kindle.” That’s why much of Lyle’s advice is derived from other writers, he said. “To be a great writer you must read in your genre and pick up or outright steal techniques that you find effective. Soon enough you’ll make things your own.”

4 & 5 LISTEN TO ELMORE LEONARD (MOST OF THE TIME).

Lyle is a huge fan of the late Elmore Leonard and he encourages writers to check out Leonard’s famous ten rules of writing (discussed in this series at *Suspense*, June 2012, Vol. 035). Lyle thinks writers should pay special attention to two of Leonard’s rules—one Lyle agrees with, one he does not.

First, Lyle said he strongly agrees with Leonard’s rule, “Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.” On this, Lyle said writers should avoid giving too much character or setting description. Instead, “put in just enough to give readers a feel of the person or place so they can fill in the blanks with their imaginations. This is part of the symbiotic relationship between writer and reader. Writers need to trust readers to fill in the gaps and not over-describe or over-explain.”

Second, Lyle said he disagrees with Leonard’s rule, “Never open a book with the weather.” Lyle said that “James Lee Burke, one of the great writers of our times, starts almost every scene with the weather. In a single sentence he can set the mood and he uses the weather to great effect.” Lyle said he thinks Leonard would appreciate that. And what Leonard was probably saying with his weather rule is that the writer shouldn’t start a chapter “with a bunch of irrelevant garbage—just get into the scene.”

As a final thought, Lyle admonished that before a writer gets too caught up in “the rules” it’s important to remember that W. Somerset Maugham may have had it right: “There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” ■

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, is the Awards Coordinator for the Thriller Awards, and is the Assistant Managing Editor of the Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children. Learn more about Anthony at anthonyfranzebooks.com.

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