

LISA
GARDNER

VS.

M.J.
ROSE

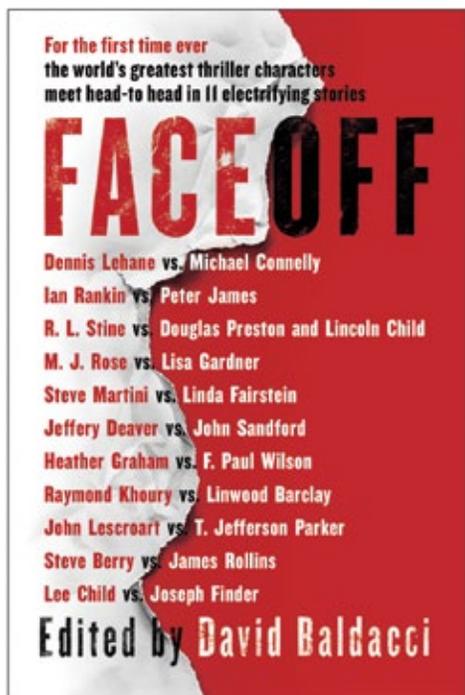
AMERICA'S FAVORITE SUSPENSE AUTHORS

★ ★ **FACEOFF** ★ ★

ON THE RULES OF FICTION

By Anthony J. Franze

Photo Credit: Lisa Gardner/Philbrick Photography,
M.J. Rose/Provided by Author



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 the authors of “FaceOff,” an upcoming anthology of short stories co-authored by some of the biggest names in suspense. Each month, two FaceOff authors will “face off” over the late Elmore Leonard’s famous rules of writing.

What would happen if two dozen of the world’s bestselling authors got together and wrote a book of short stories pairing up their series characters? If there was a fantasy football league of fiction? This June, readers will find out in “FaceOff,” an eleven-story anthology that pulls together the most beloved characters in suspense.

“FaceOff” will feature two reader favorites—Lisa Gardner and M.J. Rose—who joined forces to write, “The Laughing Buddha.” In an inspired coupling, Gardner’s no-nonsense detective D.D. Warren meets Rose’s reincarnationist Malachai Samuels. “We loved the contrast of putting together a born skeptic like D.D. Warren with old-world Dr. Samuels,” Gardner said. Rose added that the

authors, longtime fans of one another, jumped at the chance to work together and had great fun weaving reincarnation into a story about a present-day murder investigation in Boston's Chinatown.

Readers will have to wait until "FaceOff" is released in June for the Warren/Samuels showdown. Until then, Gardner and Rose agreed to face off over something befitting this series: two of Elmore Leonard's rules of writing.

ELMORE "SAID"...

Ever since the *New York Times* in 2001 published Elmore Leonard's ten rules of writing, they have become as debated as they are famous. Leonard dedicated two of his rules to dialogue tags—those verbs writers use to attribute the source of who is speaking in a scene. In Rules 3 and 4, Leonard advised writers to "[n]ever use a verb other than 'said' to carry dialogue" and "[n]ever use an adverb to modify the verb 'said.'" For Leonard, following dialogue with *he retorted cautiously*, *she replied grumblingly*, or the like is "a mortal sin." "The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange."

Leonard was not alone. The old writing standby "Elements of Style," by Strunk & White, advises: "Let the conversation itself disclose the speaker's manner or condition. Dialogue heavily weighted with adverbs after the attributive verb is cluttery and annoying. Inexperienced writers not only overwork their adverbs but load their attributives with explanatory verbs: 'he consoled,' 'she congratulated.'"

Readers of this series, too, know that many suspense writers treat the "said-only" rule as gospel. (See "Catherine Coulter's Ten Rules for Writing Sharp, Fast, and Deadly," *Suspense*, Vol. 039, Oct. 2012).

So what say the powerhouse duo of Gardner and Rose?

THE FACE OFF

"I agree with Elmore," Lisa Gardner said. The #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of twenty acclaimed novels, including "Fear Nothing," explained that "suspense writing is lean, and if you do your job correctly, there's no need for an adverb. And there's no need usually to use a verb other than 'said,' since attribution should be invisible to the reader." For both, Gardner said, "the scene and dialogue should do the work for you." Gardner also said that using an adverb can result in the writer telling, rather than showing. "I prefer to keep it clean and just use 'said' with nothing more. We're writing thrillers, not melodramas."

"I write melodramas, so I disagree," said M.J. Rose, tongue in cheek. "But I don't *totally* disagree with Lisa or Elmore—I think the rule depends on the genre." The renown writer, co-president of the International Thriller Writers, and winner of *Suspense's* Best Book of 2013 for her novel "Seduction," said that she generally agrees that for suspense novels or thrillers, writers need to keep the prose spare and that adverbs can get in the way. "In Lisa's books, for instance, I get so caught up in the action and suspense that adverbs could slow things down; it could lose what is special about her work."

On the other hand, for different genres (Rose described her own work as "crossover suspense, historical, and God-knows-what") an adverb here and there is needed. "My books jump through time and sometimes you need the adverb to capture how people from a different era talk. It's hard to put readers in a different place and sometimes a 'he said gravely' or 'she said firmly,' can help capture a character and the period."

While not backing down, Gardner agreed that the "never" in Elmore Leonard's rules is too rigid and that there can be exceptions. "My character D.D. Warren is a modern Boston detective who couldn't be more different than M.J.'s Malachai Samuels, who speaks like he's from a different era. M.J. captures a period so well that if she uses an adverb, she does it for good reason."

During the face off, Gardner and Rose in fact agreed that for any "rule" of writing, there are always exceptions. Gardner said that she was reminded of this recently in an unusual setting. "The thriller world had a huge loss recently, the death of Michael Palmer," she said. "At his funeral, Michael's youngest son, Luke, noted how his father hated the word 'suddenly' in writing. So his son said it was ironic that no other word captured the death of their beloved father who died so suddenly and unexpectedly. Sometimes the only word that can capture high drama is an adverb. So while Elmore Leonard was right in my view, writers should remember that for every rule, there is an exception that can swallow it up." ■

Anthony J. Franze is the author of the debut legal thriller, "The Last Justice." Anthony is also a lawyer in the Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm where he has represented clients in more than thirty cases in the U.S. Supreme Court. Anthony also is an adjunct professor of law, a commentator for several news outlets, and the assistant managing editor of The Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children and he currently is at work on his next High Court thriller, "The Dissent." Learn more about Anthony at www.anthonnyfranzebooks.com.