



**PETER
JAMES**

**IAN
RANKIN**

VS.

AMERICA'S FAVORITE SUSPENSE AUTHORS

★ **FACEOFF** ★

ON THE RULES OF FICTION

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 January through August editions, 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 face off over Elmore Leonard’s famous rules of writing.

This month we go international with a face-off between legendary UK crime writers Peter James and Ian Rankin. They collaborated on “In the Nick of Time,” one of eleven short stories in “FaceOff,” the highly anticipated anthology in which bestselling authors paired up to write stories coupling their series characters.

“In the Nick of Time” features Rankin’s Inspector John Rebus and James’s Detective Superintendent Roy Grace, who are the leads in two of the world’s most popular crime series. The characters join forces to solve a mystery rooted in 1960s England: the riots between rival groups known as the Mods and the Rockers.

“The Mods and Rockers were youth subcultures,” James explained. “The Mods focused on style and fashion and the Rockers on motorcycles and rock and roll. During the Sixties they made a weekend sport of going at one another.”

Rankin added that the authors chose this backdrop for the story because it

provided a plausible way to connect their main characters, who are from different countries in different police systems. “Peter’s character works out of Brighton, a seaside town where many of the riots took place, and Rebus is from Edinburgh but a fan of Sixties music and old enough that a story from that era would make sense, so it jumped out at me that this was how they could meet.” From there, the authors crafted a compelling tale of what James described as “a murder mystery about a guy who confesses to a crime and our characters get together to figure out what happened and if he’s telling the truth.”

Readers will have to wait until the June release of “FaceOff” to get more of the Rebus and Grace partnership. In the interim, Rankin and James agreed to be the latest “FaceOff” authors to go head-to-head over one of Elmore Leonard’s rules of writing.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

More than a decade ago, the *New York Times* published Elmore Leonard’s ten rules of writing. They’ve been heavily debated, sometimes criticized, but never ignored. In Rule 9, Leonard advised writers: “Don’t go into great detail describing places and things.” The late crime writer explained that authors should never go into great detail about places “[u]nless you’re Margaret Atwood and can paint scenes with language or write landscapes in the style of Jim Harrison. But even if you’re good at it, you don’t want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill.”

So what do two contemporaries of Leonard have to say about it?

THE FACE-OFF

Peter James threw down first: “I disagree with Elmore. I’m a believer in details.” The internationally bestselling author of nine Roy Grace novels, including his latest installment, “Dead Man’s Time,” said that “detail is important in crime and mystery novels because we’re writing about murder and in the real world any homicide is a puzzle of thousands of details that come together. By its nature a crime story necessarily involves a huge amount of details.”

For James, “the more details you can give, the more authentic the story feels; the reader needs to feel that you’re authoritative on the subject, a sense that you know what it’s like to fire that gun.”

But can doing so, as Leonard warned, “bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill”? Not if you do it right, James said. The trick, he said, is “knowing when and where to give the details.” Learning that trick comes mostly with time and experience, he said. “I’ve been at this for a long time. And after a while you get a sense, particularly in a series, about what to leave in or leave out.”

Ian Rankin hit back: “Early on, like most writers, I gave too much detail. As I progressed, though, I realized that you need to trust and recognize readers’ intellect.” Readers, he said, do not need things spoonfed to them; they fill in the gaps with their imaginations. But the acclaimed writer of twenty John Rebus books, including the latest, “Saints of the Shadow Bible,” agreed with James that knowing which details to leave in, and which to leave out, comes with experience.

His advice to newer writers who don’t yet have that experience: “See what experienced writers are doing and steal judiciously—just don’t get caught.”

Though Rankin is a proponent of cutting down the details about locations, he said writers should still strive to give readers a sense of place. “I think good mysteries do that. Things happen because of where they happen; if you put a story in a generic locale, some unnamed city or community, you lose that. Setting a story in a real city in real time helps the reader suspend their disbelief—they realize this could happen and you blur the line between fact and fiction.” Rankin humorously added, “Elmore was probably more successful in Hollywood than me and Peter because he was more sparing and not as tied to place. For Rebus, you’re stuck in Edinburgh.”

To that James said, “No, if Elmore was more successful it is because his books were shorter, so a mindless studio exec might actually have managed to finish one.”

During the interview both writers displayed the wit and humor they are known for. And humor, they both agreed, is something writers need to keep in mind when considering any of Elmore Leonard’s rules. “I met Elmore,” James said, “and he had a wonderfully wry sense of humor. And I think he was having fun with his rules. One of his rules is to never start a book with the weather, yet he started one of his books with the weather.”

“I also chatted once with Elmore Leonard,” Rankin added, “and I think his rules are a bit tongue in cheek; read as a whole they are quite funny, like him.... I think at bottom he was giving some advice, but recognizing what we writers know: there are no rules.” ■

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 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 Managing Editor of The Big Thrill magazine. Learn more about Anthony at <http://www.anthonyfranzebooks.com>.