

**STEVE
BERRY**

**JAMES
ROLLINS**

VS.

AMERICA'S FAVORITE SUSPENSE AUTHORS



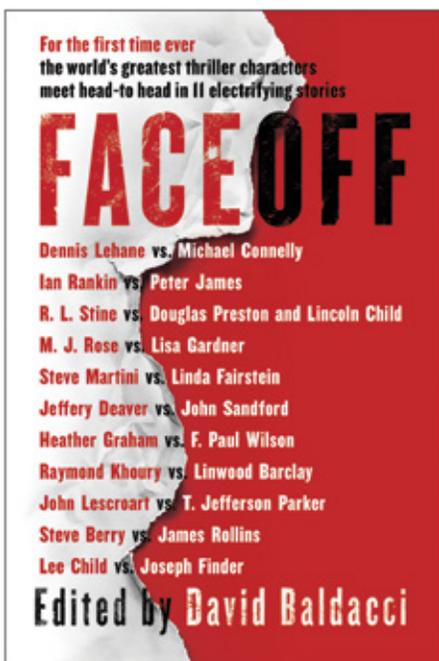
FACEOFF



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 anthology of eleven short stories co-authored by some of the biggest names in suspense. Each month, two FaceOff authors will “face off” over the rules of writing.

Two names are synonymous with edge-of-your-seat adventure thrillers: Steve Berry and James Rollins. These powerhouse bestselling authors recently joined forces to write a short story in the *New York Times* bestselling anthology, “FaceOff.” This month, in our own “face off” of sorts, Berry and Rollins agreed to go head-to-head over one of Elmore Leonard’s famous rules of writing.

COTTON MALONE VERSUS GRAY PIERCE

Steve Berry wore two hats for the “FaceOff” anthology, a book in which bestselling writers co-authored stories pairing up their series characters. First, Berry was the managing editor, or, as the anthology’s editor David Baldacci called him, “the glue

that held this project together.” Second, Berry was a contributor, working with James Rollins on something fans have long been clamoring for: a story featuring Berry’s Cotton Malone and Rollins’s Gray Pierce.

“We got paired up because we’ve been friends for a long time and have a common fan base,” Rollins said. “But also, I once made a veiled reference to Cotton Malone in one of my books.” In his 2006 thriller “Black Order,” Rollins dispatched Gray Pierce to Denmark, where he spent time at a Copenhagen bookshop owned “by an ex-lawyer from Georgia.” Rollins said that he “thought no one would notice” the unnamed reference to Malone. But notice they did, sending Rollins and Berry thousands of e-mails. Berry then added fuel to the fire when he made an indirect reference to Pierce in one of his novels (mentioning Sigma Force, the clandestine agency where Pierce works), and the authors then continued the practice for several more books. Readers kept asking: When will you pair up Malone and Pierce?

“So when ‘FaceOff’ came along,” Rollins said, “it was an ideal opportunity.”

That opportunity led to “The Devil’s Bones,” a riveting tale in which Malone and Pierce meet up on a riverboat heading down the Amazon. You’ll have to pick up “FaceOff” to learn more, but suffice it to say, fans who pined to see Malone and Pierce together have not been disappointed. The “FaceOff” collection of stories in fact has hit the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists. But let’s get to the writing face off.

¡BERRY VERSUS ROLLINS!

One of the late Elmore Leonard’s rules of writing was “Keep your exclamation points under control.” Leonard explained that writers “are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose.”

Steve Berry disagrees—he wouldn’t permit even two or three exclamation points. “I’m not a proponent of the exclamation point; I actually despise it. I think the mark should be eliminated from the English language.” The *New York Times* bestselling author of more than a dozen novels, including his latest blockbuster, “The Lincoln Myth,” said that he shuns the exclamation point because “if the writer does his or her job, they can convey excitement without it.” But Berry’s real beef with the mark goes much deeper: “The exclamation point tends to become a crutch, which can lead to lazy writing.”

James Rollins took issue with his old friend’s view. “Steve makes valid points,” he said, “but he’s wrong.” The author of “The Kill Switch” and countless other hits said that the exclamation point is a punctuation mark and thus a tool in the writer’s toolbox. “When I teach writing, I say that it’s up to the writer to make the best use of the tools available. And I think there are times when the exclamation point is a useful tool. For instance, take dialogue where a character says ‘No.’ The word followed by a period conveys something much different than when followed by an exclamation point. ‘No!’ is a more dramatic response. I suppose you could say, ‘No, he shouted,’ but that’s just adding words.”

Berry was not convinced. “If we lived in Spain where they put the exclamation point at the beginning and end of sentences, I’d agree. You come into the sentence knowing the emotion or tone. But we don’t do that. We put it at the end. So by the time you get to the mark, the writer—through the sentence or context—should have already showed the excitement the mark is meant to convey. So I stand by not using them. I don’t use them in books, in e-mails, or in any of my writing.”

Berry also noted that writers rarely stop at two or three. “They’re like potato chips—you can never seem to use just one. If I see an exclamation point at the beginning of a book, I tend to see many more later, and I just cringe.”

“Steve is right that some writers can get lazy and lean too heavily on the exclamation point,” Rollins acknowledged, “but that’s no reason to throw them out entirely. Writers get lazy and misuse adverbs, but we wouldn’t get rid of them from the language.” Like adverbs, Rollins said, the key is to use exclamation points “carefully and sparingly.” Rollins said a good test for writers is to ask themselves whether there is another way to write the sentence without the mark. If there is—get rid of it. “But if the writer can find no way to change the sentence without adding needless words or otherwise having to jump through hoops, then I say use the exclamation point.”

Though Berry and Rollins differ on the degree of usage, it is safe to say that neither would suggest the regular use of the exclamation point. And even Berry might forgive the use of a stray exclamation point if the writer pulls it off. As he advised writers in a past edition of this series, “Do whatever you want—as long as it works.” (See [Steve Berry’s Eleven Rules of Writing](#), *Suspense*, June 2012). So writers out there, the best advice? Use caution!! ■

Anthony J. Franze is the author of the debut novel, “The Last Justice,” a tale of murder and ambition set in the U.S. Supreme Court. In addition to his writing, Anthony is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm where he has represented clients in more than thirty cases in the Supreme Court. Anthony also is an adjunct professor of law, a frequent commentator for several news outlets, and the managing editor of the International Thriller Writers association’s The Big Thrill magazine. Anthony is currently at work on his next high court thriller. Learn more at <http://www.anthonfranzebooks.com>.