

**LEE  
CHILD**

**VS.**

**JOSEPH  
FINDER**

**AMERICA'S FAVORITE SUSPENSE AUTHORS**



**FACEOFF**



**ON THE RULES OF FICTION**

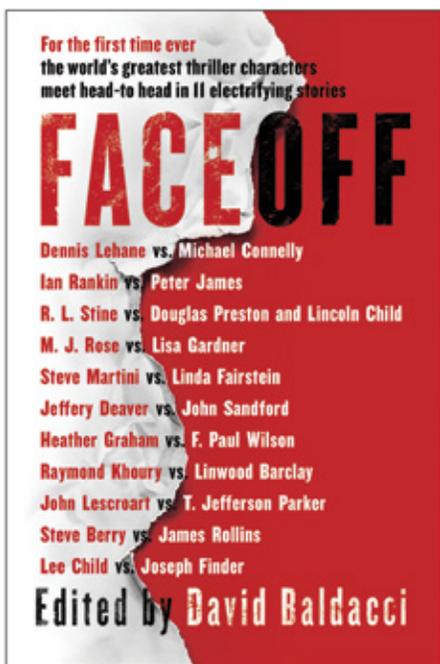
By Anthony J. Franze

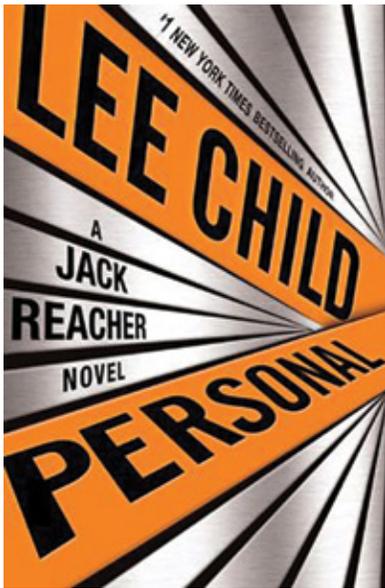
Press Photo Credit: Joseph Finder/Joel Benjamin, Lee Child/Sigrid Estrada

*In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on "the rules" of fiction. Since the January edition, Anthony has profiled the writers of "FaceOff," an anthology of eleven short stories co-authored by some of the biggest names in suspense. Each month, the FaceOff authors have "faced off" over the rules of writing. In this last face off in the series, Lee Child and Joseph Finder go head-to-head.*

Jack Reacher and Nick Heller are two of modern fiction's most famous characters, created by two of the country's most famous writers. So it should have been no surprise that a special kind of magic would happen when Lee Child and Joseph Finder penned a story pairing their iconic characters. In "Good and Valuable Consideration," one of eleven stories in the *New York Times* bestselling anthology "FaceOff," Reacher and Heller meet in a Boston sports bar. What starts off as just a couple of guys minding their own business watching a Yankees-Red Sox game turns into an Albanian mobster's worst nightmare.

You'll have to check out "FaceOff" to get the rest. Until then, Child and Finder agreed to another kind of face-off, this time over one of Elmore Leonard's rules of writing.





## IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

The first of Elmore Leonard's classic rules of writing is "Never open a book with weather." Leonard explained: "If it's only to create atmosphere, and not a character's reaction to the weather, you don't want to go on too long. The reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people."

Joseph Finder disagrees. "I don't really believe in rules in general, but I particularly disagree with this one. The point of opening a book is the hook, grabbing the reader." The author of nearly a dozen bestsellers, including his latest blockbuster, "Suspicion," added, "The weather can grab the reader, it can set a scene, a mood. As long as it grabs, I think it is perfectly acceptable."

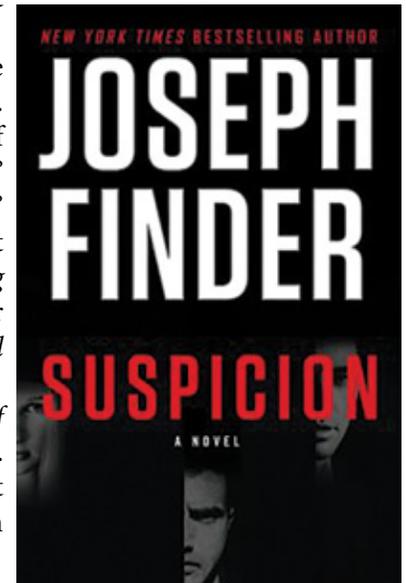
Lee Child had a different take, not so much on the directive about the weather, but on all of Elmore Leonard's rules. "I think Elmore's rules ought to be considered in the context in which they likely arose. The *New York Times* probably called, asked him to write a piece, he asked 'When do you need it?' they said 'Nine months from now,' to which he said 'No problem.' Nine months rolled by and he said, 'Oh shit,' and so he sat down, thought a list would be good, people like lists, and he dashed them off. Two things then happened that I don't think he intended: the rules became famous and widely misconceived."

The author of nineteen Reacher books, including this month's highly anticipated, "Personal," didn't say so, but he may be speaking from experience given his own [writing piece](#) in the *Times*. In any case, his point was that "Leonard's rules should be considered in this context."

As for the weather rule, Child said, "I think what Elmore was saying is don't use weather as a 'throat clearing' device; don't just go through the motions in the opening. That's a good rule." If the suspense or drama in the book is created by the weather—or if the weather serves a purpose or helps grab the reader—"it's okay to start with the weather."

"I agree with Lee," Finder said. He added humorously, "Can we do that for this article?" Finder said there are many examples of writers effectively using the weather. "Look at Orwell's '1984': it starts with *It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen*. That was a terrific sentence." Finder and Child have in fact both opened their novels with the weather, but in different ways. Finder started a book with *It was a dark and stormy night*. "I was playing with the old cliché, so it served a purpose."

Finder noted that Child's novel, "Nothing to Lose," opened with *The sun was only half as hot as he had known sun to be, but it was hot enough to keep him confused and dizzy*. "It was a way of integrating the reader to the character and mood; when used that way it works," Finder said. "Sure, if you're using the weather as a boring way to set the stage, then don't do it. But that goes for anything in writing, not just the weather."



## TO HELL WITH THE RULES

In the course of talking about the weather, both Child and Finder noted that writers need to read Leonard's or any other writing "rules" with caution. "New writers sometimes want an 'operator's manual,'" Finder said, "but none exist. Lee and I often are asked the secret to getting readers to turn the page, but we can only point to what worked for us in a given book. That doesn't mean it will work for us again or for anyone else."

Child added that "rules try to capture what worked in the past, but we're not writing in the past. I'm not contemptuous of rules, we need some basic guidelines. But if you follow them too rigidly, you may lose originality."

So, the weather may work as small talk at a cocktail party, but not as a hard-and-fast rule of writing. If the writer is going to open a book with it, though, it better pull the reader in. ■

*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. Learn more at <http://www.anthonfranzebooks.com>.*