

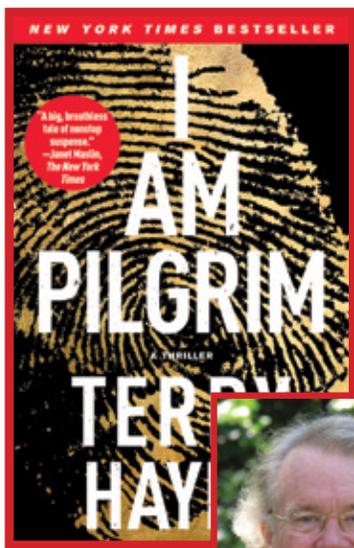


America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

ADVICE FROM TERRY HAYES AUTHOR OF *SUSPENSE'S* BEST BOOK OF 2014

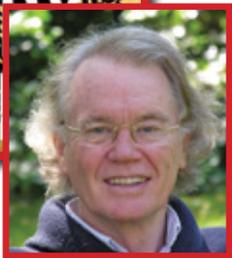
By Anthony J. Franze

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In this series, author Anthony Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. Anthony closes out the year with Terry Hayes, author of the breakout thriller “I Am Pilgrim” and winner of the 2014 Crimson Scribe Award.

Every once in a while a novel comes along that changes the game; a book that gets people talking—thinking—and lights up both bestseller lists and social media. This year, that book was Terry Hayes’s debut novel, “I Am Pilgrim.” Calling Hayes a debut author doesn’t feel quite right since he’s had a long and successful career as a screenwriter. But with his first novel, he’s crafted what I believe could go down as one of the best espionage thrillers in the past two decades.



At first glance, “I Am Pilgrim” sounds like it might be just another spy thriller: a lone-wolf hero on the hunt for a terrorist bent on destroying America. But *Pilgrim* is so much more. It’s not just that the characters—an intelligence officer code-named Pilgrim and his nemesis the Saracen—are fascinating. Or that Hayes writes with verve. Or that the tale takes readers on a breakneck journey around the world. It’s also that Hayes propelled the story with originality and heart.

Having interviewed so many authors for this series, what struck me about “I Am Pilgrim” was how often Hayes broke the conventional “rules” of writing. From his unique use of point-of-view, to the abundance of secondary characters and backstory,

to the sheer length of the novel—more than six-hundred pages!—Hayes threw out the rule book and did so with gusto.

From his home in Brisbane, Australia, Hayes and I talked about *Pilgrim* and his advice to writers.

WRITE THE BOOK YOU WANT TO READ

Hayes said the worst thing writers can do is to try to anticipate the market and write a book they *think* readers will want to buy.

“If you write for yourself, it’s art. If you write for others, it’s commerce. Commerce is great, but whether it’s a film or book,



the audience and readers can see through the cynicism quickly.” He said readers and filmgoers instinctively can tell if a book or movie was written from the heart or for commerce. “A writer might have a success or two by just trying to please readers,” he said. “But if you want longevity, you have to write for yourself.”

When crafting “I Am Pilgrim,” Hayes said, “I sat down and asked, ‘What do *I* think of this story, this character, this world,’ and I didn’t much care what others would think of it.” He was told that the espionage genre was too crowded, that screenwriters make terrible novelists, that readers only want books of a certain length.

“If you start to concern yourself with what others think—or what readers will want in a story—the work will lose anything that makes it special.” The litmus test for Hayes is simple: “I ask whether this is something I’d love to read.”

DON’T WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

We’ve all heard the conventional advice: *Write what you know*. Hayes’s view: “Forget all that.”

He said the advice is often misinterpreted; writers think that they can only write about things they’ve experienced. “That’s wrong. I don’t think JRR Tolkien experienced magic rings and dragons.”

For Hayes, the better rule is: *Write what you can imagine*.

“Make it feel real with your imagination, your research, your knowledge of human nature and life,” he said.

Hayes joked that if he wrote only what he knew his novel would be about spending time with his wife, yelling at his kids, and going to dinner and the movies. “It would be completely boring. I suspect that’s true with most writers; most of us have more than a passing affection for spending hours alone in a room by ourselves.”

Kidding aside, Hayes said that he once had an interesting career as a journalist traveling the world, but he’s never written directly about those experiences. Instead, he’s relied on his imagination, in-depth research, and drawing on things he’s learned about life. “If I just wrote what I knew, it would be a very short book.”

GET SOME EXERCISE

Hayes conceded that this sounds like unusual advice. “But writing is a sedentary life. If it’s going well, you never want to leave your desk and want to keep writing. If it’s going badly, you never want to leave your desk for fear you’ll never go back.”

Hayes said that writers should force themselves to get some fresh air and exercise. “I have an unbounded admiration for anyone who starts and finishes a novel. I admire the triumph of starting with a blank page and finishing a novel. So I don’t think there are any bad books. But words are not worth dying for and you need your health. If I didn’t force myself, I’d never get up from staring at the screen.”

Hayes said he learned years ago that he needed to add exercise into his life. “I’m not a fitness fanatic,” he said, “but I believe exercise is important for writers both for health reasons and because it helps clear your head.” (He’s not kidding, I interviewed him at 7 a.m. Australia time, and he’d already returned from a long bike ride).

WRITE WITH ATTITUDE

Hayes said one of his main criticisms about many novels is that they lack “attitude”: “They are well written, well crafted, but many seem as if the writers all went to creative writing classes since they have fine form but all the attitude and character seems bleached out of the work.” His goal with “I Am Pilgrim” was to have a voice that was memorable.

Hayes, as he did often during our call, drew on his background in film to explain. “We’ve all seen movies that are well written, well acted, and very competent, solid films, but nothing is memorable about them. The director could have been anyone. But when you see a Chris Nolan or a David Fincher film, from just a few frames, you know who directed it. I wanted my book to be like that.”

So he decided to write the book his own way—in the length of the book, in the point of view, and in the book’s embrace of pop culture. “I wanted to stand out in the crowd; bookstores have so many books, I wanted mine to be distinct.”



“IMPRINT” YOUR CHARACTERS

Anyone who’s read “I Am Pilgrim” knows that beyond its compelling leads, there are many incredible secondary characters. Hayes said he consciously tried to “imprint” each of them with something that made them memorable. “When I read, nothing drives me more crazy than when I can’t remember who’s who. So when I write secondary characters I try to imprint them; I ask myself if I was meeting them or they were in a crowd, what would make me remember them?”

For instance, there’s a scene in “I Am Pilgrim” in which the protagonist meets with a group of Turkish police officers and Hayes wanted a particular cop to stand out: “He was corrupt, so I thought it was funny to have people call him ‘Sponge Bob,’ which in turn helped me imagine how he looked; fat fingers with a crooked disposition.”

For another reader favorite, a Turkish hotel manager who befriends Pilgrim, “I had a chance to imprint him with the way he talked. I could have made him bland, but I imagined a former boxer, not a very successful one, but successful enough to buy the hotel; he’s smart but didn’t go to hotel management school and his command of English isn’t great. It was fun to write things like ‘You’re pushing my leg’ rather than ‘You’re pulling my leg.’”

“In a good movie,” Hayes said, “all the characters—the leads, the minor characters, even the extras—have something interesting about them.” That was his goal with “I Am Pilgrim.”

QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

Beyond the writing advice, I wanted to know when we would see more of Pilgrim.

Hayes said he currently is adapting the novel for film, but his next book will be a standalone, “The Year of the Locust.” He said he started the standalone out of insecurity that no one would like “I Am Pilgrim.” “Nothing would be more depressing than working on Volume Two of a book no one read. So I thought the smart thing was to write a different kind of thriller. After I’d started the new book, I read *Pilgrim* again and this time I liked it and got carried away and thought, ‘Well maybe I should make it my great trilogy.’”

“So I went from thinking no one would like it to thinking it would require three books. My wife looked at me and said, ‘You need medication.’”

Hayes said that *Locust* probably will release in 2015, “but I’ll wait until it is ready and I’m happy with it. The publishing industry seems to think that a book a year is how to go about being a writer, but one hundred years from now no one is going to say, ‘He was so good, he wrote a book a year.’ If they remember anything, it will be that the book was good.”

Hayes said he feels an obligation to himself and readers to wait until the book is ready. *Pilgrim* took several years to finish after it was sold. “All interests are served by publishing a good book. No one is going to forgive a bad book because you wrote it in nine months. People will just say it was a crappy book. And once you’ve done that, you’ve not only lost readers, you’ve lost yourself.” ■

Anthony Franze is a writer with novels forthcoming from St. Martin’s Press/Thomas Dunne Books and a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm. He also is an adjunct professor of law and has been a commentator with articles in Bloomberg, The New Republic, The National Law Journal, and other prominent publications. In 2014, the International Thriller Writers association named him Managing Editor of The Big Thrill magazine. Franze lives in the Washington, D.C. area, where he is currently finalizing his next thriller, “The Dissent.” Learn more at <http://www.anthonnyfranzebooks.com>.

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