

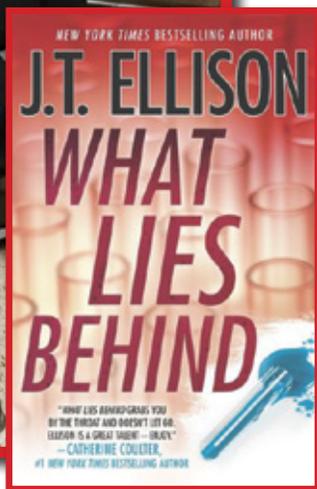
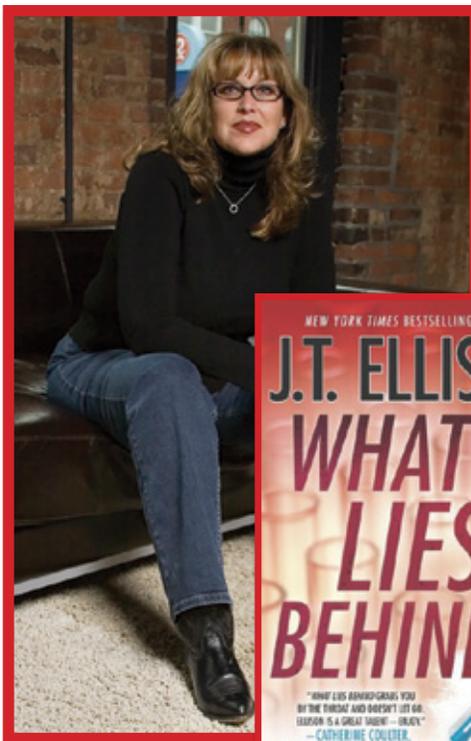


# America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE FUN!  
ADVICE FROM J.T. ELLISON

By Anthony J. Franze  
Photo Credit: Chris Blanz, Cabedge

*In this series, author Anthony Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month, Anthony talks with New York Times bestselling powerhouse J.T. Ellison.*



Spend five minutes with J.T. Ellison and you quickly find the source of energy, wit, and fun in her page-turning thrillers. Bubbly yet intense, humble yet confident, creative yet business-minded, she’s one of those unforgettable people who manages to transfer her personal energy onto the page. And with two successful series under her belt—and an acclaimed partnership with Catherine Coulter—Ellison is just hitting her stride. Her latest, “What Lies Behind” (MIRA, May 26, 2015), promises to be another winner.

Ellison caught the thriller-writing bug in her teens when she discovered John Grisham, Patricia Cornwell, and James Patterson—and in college she double majored in Creative Writing and Politics. She’d planned to pursue her MFA, but her thesis advisor—who thumbed her nose at crime fiction—told Ellison that she didn’t have what it takes to be a published author. Devastated, Ellison gave up the dream, and went on to a successful political career working inside Washington, including a position at the White House.

It would be years before Ellison ever put pen to the page. But one day, while recovering from surgery, she read three novels in John Sandford’s

*Prey* series, and inspiration struck. She decided to give writing another try. The rest, as they say, is history.

Given her experience with the thesis advisor, it probably should come as no surprise that Ellison started our interview by



saying, “I’m no teacher.” And she still has a healthy skepticism of anyone telling an aspiring author whether and how to write. But perhaps because of John Sandford—and the many other thriller writers who gave her advice and encouragement along the way—she welcomed the chance to pass on some of the things she’s found helpful in her writing journey.

## YOU MAKE THE RULES

“My best advice came from Stuart Woods,” Ellison said. “He used to include an author’s note at the end of his books that basically said, ‘Don’t bother contacting me, I won’t respond.’ So, of course, I contacted him.” Ellison was working on a novel and wanted to know whether it would be proper to wait until the middle of the book to introduce a main point-of-view character. Surprisingly, Woods wrote back. “He said, ‘The only rules are those you create page by page.’ This opened so many doors for me. To have this iconic *New York Times* bestselling author give me permission to do it *my* way, blew me away. I had been in a writing program where there had been so many rules, and only one ‘right’ way, and Woods told me that *I* get to make the rules—it changed how I approached writing.”

## DON’T BE AFRAID TO BE DIFFERENT

Ellison said that writers shouldn’t strive to fit in. “Writers who spend all their time following ‘the rules’ or trying to write what is currently popular do so at the risk of losing originality. It’s constraining; it makes every book alike.” Ellison said that she tries to write the type of books that get her excited as a reader—something new, something different, something that sets the author and book apart from the crowd. She pointed to Jason Matthews’s debut novel, “Red Sparrow,” as a recent example. “It’s a spy novel with many classic elements, but it managed to be fresh and original at the same time. The author included recipes at the end of chapters, and I thought, *Recipes? In a thriller?* But the author made it work.” Of course, that’s the rub, Ellison said: “You can be different, but you still have to make it work.”

## DON’T COVET O.P.P.

Ellison understands that new writers seek wisdom in the processes and styles of writers they admire—she does—and she thinks that’s okay. She said there are only seven plots in literature, and writers should draw on things that they love in their favorite books. “Everyone is inspired by everyone else, there’s nothing wrong with that. Regardless of whether a writer is influenced by another author, we all bring our own experiences and voice to our work.”

Ellison cautioned, however, that writers shouldn’t get caught up in emulating too closely their favorite authors’ processes. “I have a horrible quality of coveting what I call O.P.P.—other people’s processes; to examine and want to adopt how great writers work.” Ellison said she’ll be at a writing conference and hear how Stephen King or Michael Connelly write and want to adopt their methods. “What I’ve learned, though, is that it doesn’t work. Writers need to find what works for them.”

For Ellison, one writing tool she swears by is Scrivener, a word processing and project management computer program. She said she discovered it after publishing several books. “It freed me from the constraints of ordinary word processing programs. It allows me to play with point of view, to think in terms of chapter and scene, rather than the story as a whole; it really has helped the way I write.”

As for the longstanding “plotters” versus “pantsers” debate that inevitably is discussed at writing conferences—i.e., whether she outlines or writes by the seat of her pants—Ellison falls somewhere in between. She has a general idea of where she is going with a story, but waits until she has half the book down before outlining. She reiterated, though, that what works for her won’t necessarily work for someone else. The key is to just find what gets you in the chair to write.



## GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO REFUEL THE TANK

Ellison recommends that aspiring scribes try to write every day. In fact, when we spoke, she'd just turned in two books and was waiting for edits, and didn't know what to do with herself—so she started another book.

That said, Ellison said writers need breaks. “Go to a coffee shop and eavesdrop; go to the movies and see how a story structure works. And *read!*” She thinks reading is one of the most important things a writer can do. “Sometimes I get stuck, and reading someone else's work gives me the kick start I need.” It's not that she's adopting someone else's style or story. It's that reading gets her imagination flowing. Gets her excited to turn back to her own work.

## CONTROL YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media as writerly advice? Ellison, an author known for her social media savvy, thinks so. She said social media can stifle a writer's creativity. Ellison has a love-hate relationship with it all. “Social media takes away the mystique of being a writer; everyone has access to writers now and writers are expected to respond to readers.” On the other hand, “it helps build relationships with readers, which is great.”

But the danger sneaks in when it starts to interfere with writing time. She's discussed the [perils to writers](#) on her blog, where she advises authors to ask themselves these questions: “Is the Internet as a whole compromising my writing time? Am I reading less because I'm spending more time online? Why am I doing this? Am I reaching out to strangers because I'm not feeling the same sort of support at home? Am I lonely? Blocked? Frustrated?”

Her bottom line: “If you're constantly on Facebook, you're not writing. If you're spending hours on Twitter, you're not writing. It's fun and it's easy to get lost in it, but you need to set limits. Because if you're not writing, well, you're not writing.”

## HAVE FUN!

Ellison's last bit of advice is that writers should remember, “This is supposed to be fun.” She said don't let all the stress, the rejection, and the business side get in the way of the fact that “we do this because we love it.”

As for Ellison, she's having fun indeed with her latest, “What Lies Behind,” the fourth in the popular *Samantha Owens* series. This time, murder hits close to home for Owens, when she's called in to consult on an apparent murder-suicide in her own neighborhood. But the case doesn't turn out to be so simple when agents find a hidden refrigerator that holds vials containing a deadly substance. An otherwise routine crime soon turns into something much bigger. The book takes place over twenty-four hours, which is fitting, because once you pick it up you'll be up all night finishing it. ■

*\*Anthony Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm, and author of “The Advocate's Daughter,” coming in March 2016 from St. Martin's Press/Minotaur.*

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