



America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

CHASING THE STORY, EMBRACING THE PANIC
HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN'S RULES OF WRITING

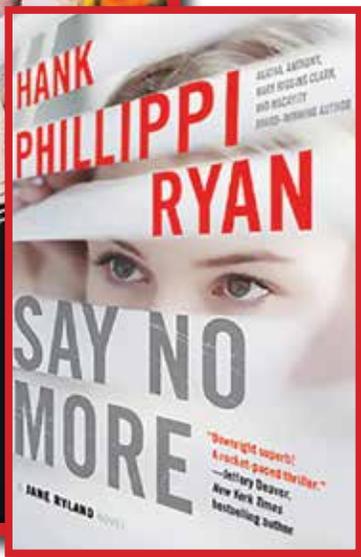
By Anthony Franze
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In this series, author Anthony Franze interviews other suspense writers about "the rules" of writing. This month, Anthony talks with bestselling author Hank Phillippi Ryan.

Hank Phillippi Ryan has probably won more literary awards than she can keep track of—Agathas, Anthonys, Daphnes, Macavitys, to name a few.

But winning awards is nothing new for Ryan, who by day is a celebrated investigative journalist in Boston, winning 33 Emmys, 14 Edward R. Murrows, and—well, you get the idea. Despite the accolades, when we spoke recently, Ryan carried no literary airs. She was generous with her time, thoroughly prepared for the interview, and excited about her new novel, "Say No More," which came out this month and already is getting rave reviews.

One gets the sense that Ryan brings her infectious enthusiasm to everything she does. She embraces life, the thrill of chasing a story, real or fictional. So it should be no surprise that Ryan's advice to aspiring scribes is to embrace everything—the good and the bad—that comes with becoming a writer.





1. EMBRACE THE PROCESS

“Writing a book is difficult,” Ryan said. “And writing a good book is very difficult. It gets even more difficult with each book because you want to show you’ve gotten better, you’re growing as a writer.” Ryan said that budding authors need to embrace that writing is hard. Even now, nine novels later, Ryan said she struggles. “Some days my brain is firing so rapidly my fingers can’t type fast enough. Other days, I think my work is terrible, every word is a cliché, every line derivative. But I’ve learned that the answer to my fears is to just move forward.”

Ryan’s point is that once writers accept that there will be good days—and many, many bad—it frees them to sit down and write without the angst and self-doubt. “There will be no book if you don’t write it. Just keep going!”

2. EMBRACE SURPRISE

Ryan said she starts a book with only “one unique gem of an idea—one tiny thing that makes the book different, special.” From there, she doesn’t outline or plot out the events. As with her journalism career, she chases the story. “I’ve been a reporter for forty years, and when I investigate I have no idea where the story will lead; I’m following where it takes me. The story is already written but I don’t know it yet. I need to discover it. The same is true with my novels.”

One of the reasons Ryan does not outline, she said, is that she likes to be surprised. “When my editor asks for a synopsis of my next book, I say, ‘How can I send a summary of what’s going to happen if I don’t know yet?’”

Ryan said she subscribes to one of Dennis Lehane’s rules: she puts characters in a room and lets them crash into each other. “When you write real characters with real passion, conflict will arise. They will move the story where it’s supposed to go; you can’t know where until they start behaving the way they behave.” Writers should embrace the surprise, she said. “It’s the magic of writing.”

3. EMBRACE EDITING

Ryan said the best education she’s had as a writer was being forced to cut her first manuscript from 723 pages down to 400. “It made me analyze whether each scene was needed, whether each paragraph was needed, whether each line was needed. And whether I had the perfect words. It made me assess my crutches. I realized I was repetitive. I was derivative. I was showing off. So I took all of that out.”

Ryan said when you assess your manuscript in this way, what’s left is “the book you should’ve written in the first place.” Ryan said editing is one of her favorite parts of the process because it means that she’s completed a first draft. The cutting and refining is the fun part.

“THERE’S NOT A SINGLE AUTHOR I’VE MET WHO DOESN’T HAVE DOUBTS; THE MOMENT WHERE WE SAY, ‘THE BOOK IS TERRIBLE, I’M A TERRIBLE WRITER, I CAN’T FIGURE OUT WHAT’S NEXT, AND I DON’T SEE HOW I EVER WILL.’ ”



Not that it's easy. "When you write one-hundred-thousand words you're so familiar with the book that you can't see it objectively anymore. The best thing you can do is to try to read it through someone else's eyes." One way to do so, she said, is to read the manuscript aloud. Something about hearing the words, she said, takes you out of "writer brain" and into "reader brain." "Reading out loud will identify the peaks and valleys in your story—they will reveal themselves in astonishingly clear ways."

4. EMBRACE PRIORITIES

Ryan said that one of the biggest impediments to becoming a writer is life. Laundry, social media, television. Ryan said she once alphabetized her spice rack to procrastinate writing. "Then I realized that I was the only one who cared about my book. If I didn't finish, someone else would write a better book. If your priority is your novel, you need to write before all that other stuff."

She prioritizes writing by giving herself a daily goal. "I know I need five-hundred-forty words a day to meet deadline. It's silly and childlike, but it gives me great joy to fill in a box with a checkmark after I finish my words. Some days I'll reach my goal in an hour, others it's four hours." Having a daily word-count goal works for Ryan because it helps take the anxiety out of the process. "When I'm behind, I know how far behind. But it gives me comfort because when I do my words per day I know inevitably I'll be done. It's just arithmetic."

Ryan said that the key is finding a time to write that works for you. "I couldn't be one of those writers who gets up early—I'd fall asleep at my desk. But after years working the eleven o'clock news, my brain is humming at eleven, so that's a great time for me to get down those words. Find your sweet spot. My mom always said, 'You will if you want to.'"

5. EMBRACE THE PANIC

"There's not a single author I've met who doesn't have doubts; the moment where we say, 'The book is terrible, I'm a terrible writer, I can't figure out what's next, and I don't see how I ever will.' But inevitably and absolutely after we go through this panic, the answer emerges."

When Ryan reaches the I-have-no-idea-what-to-do-next point, that means the great idea is coming soon. "This is a point in the journey. The next point is when I figure out the solution. I embrace the panic as just one of the mile markers in the marathon of writing that I'll soon be running past." In Ryan's most recent novel, "Say No More," she crosses the finish line a winner. ■

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