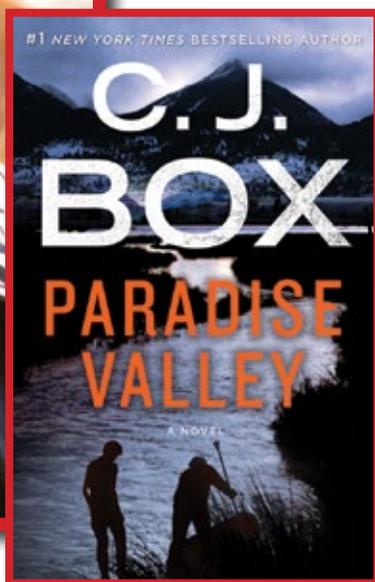
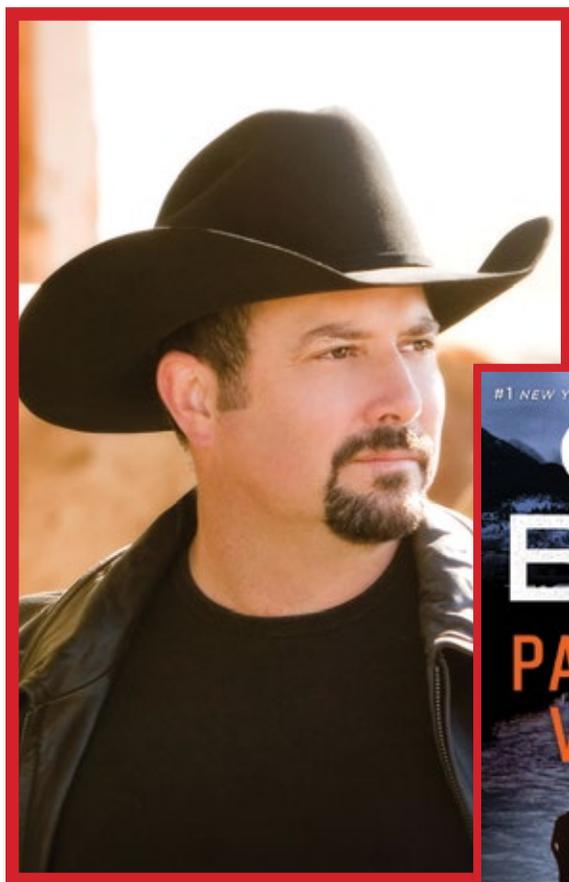




# America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction THE COWBOY WAY: C. J. BOX TALKS WRITING

By Anthony Franze and Barry Lancet  
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*In this series, authors Anthony Franze and Barry Lancet interview other suspense writers about “the rules” of writing. This edition, Anthony talks with #1 New York Times bestselling author C. J. Box.*



If you ran into C. J. Box on the street—or on his Wyoming ranch—you probably wouldn't expect that he's one of the country's preeminent suspense writers. Box wears a large black Stetson and the humble demeanor of someone who'd rather spend his time outdoors on horseback than hobnobbing with New York literary types.

But behind the cowboy exterior is a literary powerhouse. Box is a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of nearly two dozen novels, has won more awards than he likely can keep track of, and has millions of books in print. Like Box himself, his novels aren't conventional. The hero in his *Joe Pickett* series isn't your typical detective with a dark past who can fight his way out of any situation, but instead, a grounded game warden.



## “I NEVER INTENDED IT TO BE A SERIES. I MEAN, WHO WOULD HAVE EXPECTED A GAME WARDEN TO CARRY A SERIES?”

And while Box could have made a career out of Pickett, the author also has penned acclaimed standalones, including his Edgar Award winning “Blue Heaven.”

Box’s upcoming novel, “Paradise Valley” (St. Martin’s/Minotaur, July 25, 2017), could well be his best yet. The story follows investigator Cassie Dewell, who for the past three years has been hunting a serial killer known as the Lizard King, a predator who skulks the highways and truck stops for runaways and prostitutes. Box described this fourth book in his Highway Quartet simply: “Cassie versus the Lizard King in the ultimate conclusion to the series.”

I caught up with Box recently, in between his book tours, where we discussed his advice to up-and-coming scribes.

### READ WIDELY

“I often get questions from aspiring writers,” Box said. “They want to know the magic trick to writing a bestselling novel. There is no magic trick, of course. The best advice I have is for them to read—and read widely.”

Box said he’s constantly surprised at how many aspiring authors tell him they don’t read. “Some are so in love with their own voice that they don’t think they need to read anyone else. That’s a mistake.”

Box said there’s no writing class, no MFA program, no training he can think of that is better for teaching writing than reading. “Read in the genre you like and analyze works from writers you love. See how authors who have made it do it. That’s what I did.” Box said he was trained as a journalist, but he learned fiction deconstructing his favorite novels. “I asked myself how the authors made me want to turn the page, how they made me feel a certain way, how they surprised me. I taught myself by trying to understand how others did it.”

For Box, his go-to book was Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22,” which he’s read at least four times and “deconstructed back to front.” If you don’t read, he said, you won’t have the tools to write.

### USE DISCIPLINE WITH POINT OF VIEW

“One of the biggest errors I see with newer authors,” Box said, “is not effectively using point of view.” A mistake he sees over and over again is authors starting out in first or third person, but slipping into omniscient point of view—suddenly having the narrator know the thoughts of *all* the characters rather than just those of the point-of-view characters.

“Staying with the point of view makes a story more authentic and adds tension,” Box explained, “because the reader knows only what the point-of-view characters know.” When writers slip into omniscient, “they end up telling the reader something, rather than having the reader, like the point-of-view character, discover the information as the story progresses.” Pick a POV and stick to it.



## DON'T HOLD BACK

Box said he's noticed that many aspiring or debut authors write their first book with an eye toward it becoming a series, and as a result "they hold back, perhaps waiting to give readers what they might otherwise give them in a standalone with the excuse that it will come in later books."

That's wrongheaded, he believes. "They should give the book everything they have and not focus on the next book or book after that, but put it all on the table. These tough days in publishing it's even more important to make your first book everything it can be. If it doesn't make a splash, there may not be a second book."

Box followed his own advice for his blockbuster *Joe Pickett* series. "I never intended it to be a series. I mean, who would have expected a game warden to carry a series? It only became one because the first book did well enough for the publisher to order more. And I think that's because I didn't hold back."

## LISTEN TO ELMORE

Regular readers of this series know that we're big fans of Elmore Leonard's famous "[10 Rules of Writing](#)." Box is too. "I go back to the rules often and re-read them. They keep me on track." Box particularly likes Leonard's advice that writers should "leave out the part that readers tend to skip." He encourages all newer authors to read Leonard's ten short rules.

But Box said there's one important part of Leonard's rules that writers should keep in mind. "Elmore Leonard qualified all of his rules. They all have exceptions. Which is good advice because at the end of the day, every rule can be broken—if the writer does it well." ■

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\* [Anthony Franze](#) is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a prominent Washington, D.C. law firm, and author of thrillers set in the Supreme Court, including "The Outsider" (St. Martin's Press, Mar. 21, 2017) and "The Advocate's Daughter" (St. Martin's Press, 2016).

\* [Barry Lancet](#) is the author of the award-winning international suspense series featuring Jim Brodie. The latest entry is "The Spy Across the Table" (Simon & Schuster) and sends Brodie careening from Washington, D.C. and San Francisco to Japan, then on to South Korea, the DMZ, and the Chinese-North Korean border. An American expat raised in California, Lancet has lived in Japan for more than twenty years.

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