

Ten Rules for Suspense Fiction **By Brian Garfield**

[Editor's note: In 1994, John Grisham revealed to NEWSWEEK that he credited the following article by Brian Garfield with giving him the tools to create his groundbreaking thriller, THE FIRM, as well as subsequent books. Garfield himself is a noted bestselling novelist, as well as a screenwriter, producer, and nonfiction writer. He won the Edgar Award for HOPSCOTCH, which was made into the prize-winning movie of the same name, starring Walter Matthau and Glenda Jackson. For more of this renowned author's credits, please see his bio at the end of this article.]

The English call them thrillers, and in our clumsier way we call them novels of suspense.

They contain elements of mystery, romance and adventure, but they don't fall into restrictive categories. And they're not circumscribed by artificial systems of rules like those that govern the whodunit or the gothic romance. The field is wide enough to include Alistair MacLean, Allen Drury, Helen MacInnes, Robert Crichton, Graham Greene, and Donald E. Westlake. (Now there's a parlay.) The market is not limited by the stigmata of genre labels, and therefore the potential for success of a novel in this field is unrestricted: DAY OF THE JACKAL, for instance, was a first novel.

The game's object: To perch the reader on edge --- to keep him flipping pages to find out what's going to happen next.

The game's rules are harder to define; they are few, and these are elastic. The seasoned professional learns the rules mainly in order to know how to break them to good effect.

But such as they are, the rules can be defined as follows.

Start with action; explain it later.

This is an extension of Raymond Chandler's famous dictum: When things slow down, bring in a man with a gun. To encourage the reader to turn to page 2, give him something on page 1 --- conflict, trouble, fear, violence.

I realize you've got a lot of background that needs to be established, leading up to the first moments of overt conflict, but you can establish all that in chapter 2. Flash back to it if you need to. But in Chapter 1, get the show on the road.

Make it tough for your protagonist.

Give him a worthy antagonist and make things look hopeless. Don't drop convenient solutions in his lap. The tougher the opposition, the more everything is stacked against the protagonist, the better.

Plant it early; pay it off later.

Don't bring in new characters or facts at the end to help solve the protagonist's dilemma. He must work out his own solution based on a conflict that's established early in the story.

No cavalry to the rescue, and no sudden unearthing of a revealing letter written before he died by a character who was dispatched way back in Chapter 3. (Unless, of course, you established in Chapter 4 that such a letter exists, and followed that revelation with a race between the protagonist and his enemies to see who'll get the letter first.) No cavalry to the rescue.

Give the protagonist the initiative.

All good dramatic writing centers on conflict --- interior (alcoholism, oedipal conflicts) or exterior (a dangerous enemy, an alien secret police force). Only in poor gothic fiction is the protagonist habitually and tearfully and hand-wringingly at the mercy of evil opposing forces that push him or her around at will.

The best story is usually that in which the protagonist takes active steps to achieve a goal against impossible odds, or to prevent opposing forces from overcoming him or his loved ones. The protagonist may begin by reacting, but in the end he must act from his own initiative.

Give the protagonist a personal stake.

No longer is it acceptable for the hero to solve a mystery just because it presents an interesting puzzle. The more intimate his involvement in the main conflict of the story, the better.

He himself, or his aims, should be in jeopardy: His own life or those of his loved ones should be in danger, or his best friend has been murdered, or he is the kind of character whose values and principles won't let him sit by and allow injustice to destroy people around him.

Whatever the conflict is, if he loses, it's going to cost him horribly; that's the essence.

Give the protagonist a tight time limit, and then shorten it.

This doesn't always work because the logic of many stories prohibits it; don't use it unless you can work it in believably. But when time is a factor, and when the brief span of time in which the hero must resolve the conflict is then shortened, you have gone a long way toward heightening the suspense.

Choose your character according to your own capacities, as well as his.

Don't use as your protagonist an accomplished professional spy unless you are prepared to do the research and groundwork necessary to create such a character convincingly. It is better, particularly when approaching the early stages of your own professionalism, to stick to the familiar.

Some of the most successful suspense-novel protagonists --- many of Eric Ambler's, for instance --- are ordinary innocent people caught up in dangerous webs. The indignant honest idealist makes a good protagonist because his innocence makes the professional opposition all the more frightening. Yet a plot-structure for this character is often difficult to contrive because, in spite of his naiveté, he has to be clever and resourceful enough (not lucky) to prevail over his awesome enemies.

The other face of this coin, of course, is the professional-crook-as-protagonist; he's easy to identify with because he's an outcast, an underdog, one man using his wits to survive against society's oppressive machinery. But the pitfalls of this genre are treacherous, and unless you know criminal procedure and feel comfortable competing with Anthony Burgess and Richard Stark, it's better to avoid the crook-hero in the beginning.

Know your destination before you set out.

The prevailing weakness of many suspense stories that are otherwise successful is the letdown the reader experiences at the end --- the illogical and disappointing anticlimax. It isn't enough to set up intriguing conflicts and obey all the other rules if you haven't got an ending that fulfills the promise of the preceding chapters.

It becomes disgustingly obvious when a writer has confronted his hero with thrilling obstacles only to paint himself into a corner. Presented with his own unsolvable cliffhanger, he is reduced to bringing in deus ex machina to solve the hero's problems for him.

It isn't necessary to tie up all loose ends, but the climax should resolve the principal conflict one way or another. (In recent years, to avoid the traditional clichés of virtue-triumphant or ironic-downfall, several talented novelists have resorted to obscure endings that no reader could possibly decipher. I rather hope the fad is dying out; whatever the reasons behind it, it demonstrates lazy thinking and infuriates the reader.)

The best key to a good ending is to know what the ending will be before you start writing the book. Whether you write a preliminary outline or not, you should know where the journey will end, and how.

Don't rush in where angels fear to tread.

I admit this one is a catchall. Essentially I mean that it is wise to observe not only what the pros do, but also what they avoid doing. The best writers do not jump on bandwagons; they build new ones.

The pro doesn't write a caper novel about the world's biggest heist unless he's convinced he can write an unusual story with a unique and important twist. Otherwise he risks unfavorable comparison with the classics in that subgenre. "Why bother with it if it's not as taut as *Rififi* and not as funny as *The Hot Rock*?"

Yet this should not be taken to mean every writer must obey faddish advice, such as "Spy fiction is dead," or "Historical novels are out this season." There is no such thing as a dead genre because the human imagination is limitless, and there is never a dearth of new ideas, new twists, new talents.

The question is, "Is this idea strong enough and important enough to make the story sufficiently different from its predecessors to merit publication?" If a novel is good enough, it will find a publisher whether it is a hard-boiled detective story, a western, a spy novel, a historical adventure, or a novel about bug-eyed monsters from Mars. If it isn't good enough, the publisher may reject it by saying that such novels are out of style, but this is merely a euphemism.

Don't write anything you wouldn't want to read.

This one sounds self-evident, but I've met several young writers who decided they wanted to start out by hacking their way through gothics or westerns, just to learn the ropes, because those categories looked easy to imitate. Nuts. If you start out that way, you'll end up a hack.

Now if you like to read westerns, then write a western. But don't write into a genre for which you have contempt. If you don't like gothics but insist on writing one, your contempt will show; you can't hide it. I don't say you can't sell books this way; God knows people do, all too often. But if you thoroughly enjoy sea stories --- even if you don't know a thing about nautical life --- you're better off attempting to write a sea story because you'll go into it with enthusiasm,