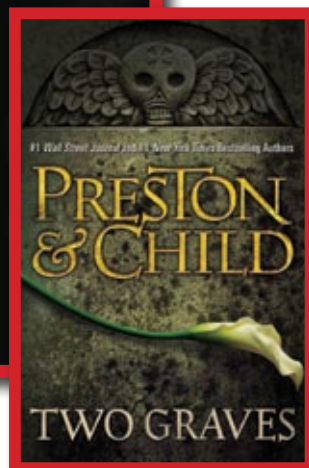
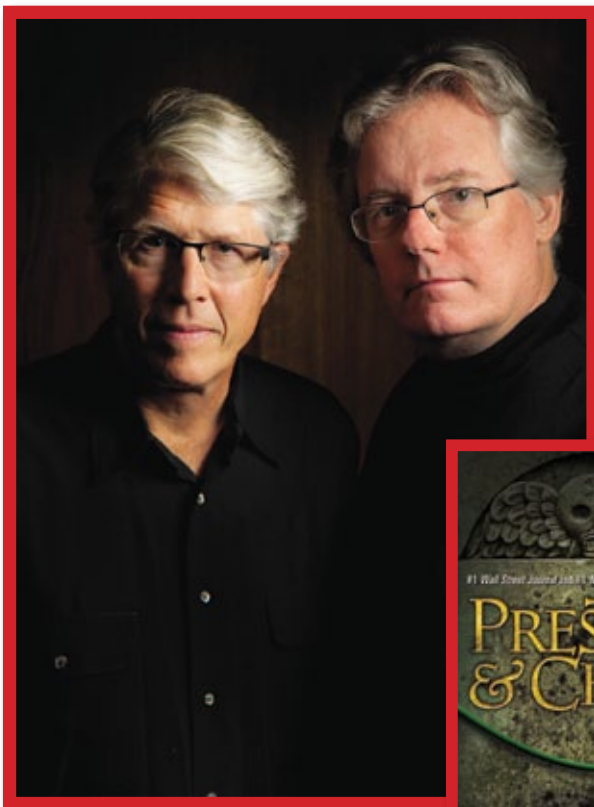




America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

THE DYNAMIC DUO: PRESTON & CHILD

By Anthony J. Franze
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In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on “the rules” of fiction. This month, #1 New York Times bestselling authors Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child share their advice. Next month, Anthony sits down with Andrew Gross.

If Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child weren't bestselling authors—possibly the finest writing partnership in fiction—they could do well as a comedy team. In the hour I sat down with them, there was more banter and laughs than you'd expect in the average college dorm. Preston started the interview by declaring, “I spend most of my time editing Linc's deficient prose,” to which Child replied, “My job is to turn Doug's lumps of coal into diamonds.”

It probably should come as no surprise that the two writers jab at one another like childhood friends; they've been a team for nearly two decades. Along the way, their books have hit the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list, been made into a number-one box office movie, and been chosen by readers in a *NPR* poll as among the greatest thrillers ever written. Continuing that success, their latest collaboration, “Two Graves,” is a masterful

and spellbinding conclusion to the Helen Trilogy featuring the unforgettable character Agent Pendergast.

When they weren't making me laugh, Preston and Child shared with me their best advice to aspiring writers:

Treat writing like a job. Child said writers should “set a schedule and block out time each day to write.” Preston added that newer scribes also need “to make sure your family and loved ones don't interrupt you during your writing time. If you're a lawyer or doctor, friends don't just stop by the office to chat or interrupt you from your work. But for some reason, people think writing is different. It isn't, and you need to make clear that this is sacred time.”

Stop writing each day when you still have more to say. Preston said this is a rule, borrowed from Hemingway, he's found invaluable. “It's better to stop when you have something you're just dying to get down on paper—the next day will start like a dream. By contrast, if things get sticky the night before, they'll be even stickier in the morning.” Child added. “And for me that usually means a call from Doug wanting me to drop everything and work through where he's stuck.”

Don't write to the market. Child said that too often authors write what they think will be popular when they should be writing the book they'd want to read. Preston concurred: “Most thrillers recently seem to involve the same themes—terrorists, nuclear weapons, government conspiracies, and the like.” The key is to come up with something original—something that makes other writers say, “Why didn't I think of that?”

Take care with your characters. Preston said newer writers sometimes give too much back story with their characters. “They think to create a great character you need to tell the reader the character's life story and all the terrible events that haunt the character.” The reader doesn't need to be spoon-fed some tortured past, he said. “The writer should develop the character by what the character says and does.” Child added that newer writers shouldn't take shortcuts with the characters, such as anchoring a reader's understanding of a character to a real person (“he looked like X actor”; “she sounded like Y actress.”).

Disregard some conventional rules. Preston thinks “show, don't tell” is a false rule that newer writers often take too literally. “The correct rule is: know when to show and know when to tell. Beginning writers often get it backwards, show when they should tell, tell when they should show.” For instance, he said, newer writers often



overuse the flashback. “Don’t jump back five years when he found his mother hanging from a tree, just tell the reader.”

Child disagrees with the old standby “write what you know.” If authors wrote only what they knew, books would be incredibly boring. “Writers can conduct research and learn things they don’t know. They can put themselves in the position of the characters and ask what they’d do.”

Throw out the how-to fiction guides.

Preston and Child do not care much for how-to books on novel writing. Both said a more useful exercise is for writers to choose a favorite suspense novel and deconstruct it. “Ask yourself what you like about the characters, the pacing, the writing,” Preston said. “Don’t imitate or copy it, but analyze the technique,” Child added.

Don’t treat every word like a precious

stone. Beyond humor, one of the secrets of the Preston/Child collaboration is trust. “When Linc tells me something I’ve written is pure crap, I have to believe him,” Preston said. “You really have to check your ego at the door,” Child added. It helps, Preston said, that “we are not prima donnas who think that every word that trips off our pen is a precious pearl to be coddled and preserved.” Each slashes away at the other’s work, resulting, as *Booklist* said, in “a stylistic grace and thematic resonance” that could not be achieved by most solo authors. The lesson for newer writers is to find someone they trust who will review and edit drafts with a critical eye.

Know your weaknesses.

I closed by asking Preston and Child to identify one another’s writing weaknesses. Preston gleefully said that Child’s initial drafts often use too many adverbs. “He also overuses the word ‘then’— ‘*then* this happened, *then* this happened, *then* . . .’ This is unnecessary and implied by the chronology of the sentences.” Child said, “Doug has too many problems to catalog.” But if he had to list one, it’s Preston’s sex scenes. “As I once told him: if this is what you think makes a good sex scene, I feel sorry for your wife.” ■

Anthony J. Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm and the author of the debut legal thriller, “The Last Justice.” In addition to his writing and law practice, he is an adjunct professor of law, has been a commentator for Bloomberg, the National Law Journal and other news outlets, and is a contributing editor for the Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children.

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