

The Process of Writing Fiction□□□□□□□□□□□□

by Jack Sparacino



This column, focused on the processes that writers use to do their work, percolated for a year. It began with my curiosity about how writers pursue their craft but became fascinatingly intricate as I looked into it.

A few things quickly became clear. First, fiction writers are distinct from non-fiction writers in terms of the processes they use since they are not as dependent on the data streams surrounding how actual events take place. Second, I needed input from real live successful writers with a talent for hooking readers.

So where to start, what terrific writers did I know? Well, none at first so I tried to contact a favorite novelist, John Sandford, the pseudonym for John Roswell Camp, who has won the Pulitzer Prize in journalism and the Distinguished Writing Award of the American Society of Newspaper Editors for 1985. More importantly here, Sandford writes terrific novels including those in the Prey series ("Winter Prey," "Rules of Prey," etc.) and the Virgil Flowers series ("Dark of the Moon," "Shock Wave," etc.). These novels are terrific: entertaining and packed with interesting characters and action.

To my delight, my request for information about his writing process was answered by his son Ros, who works with him and handles his correspondence. Reading his detailed response, I felt fortunate to glimpse "how they do it." Here is what I learned. Direct quotes are in italics. The process for the Prey and Virgil books is fundamentally mechanical, the steps of which are clear and specific.

Write Away: Part One

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- It has to start with action, because this is a thriller and thrillers have to thrill.
- For thrillers of this type, it usually means someone has to die, because nobody's going to make a book about a serial mugger (although I suppose in principle it's possible).
- The killing either has to make sense (the killer has a plan) or it has to make meta-sense (it doesn't make sense because he's insane, but that's okay for a thriller).
- The killer has to get away with it for nearly 400 pages before finally getting caught. And you have to have them get away with it for nearly 400 pages without making the cops seem incompetent.

Ros also noted that the big break that leads to the endgame has to vary from novel to novel, lest the main character risk becoming a one-trick pony. And it can't repeatedly be too far out of their area of expertise or they risk becoming a polymath superhuman (although a little bit of that trait isn't bad at all).

The rest of the process is essentially filling in the blanks, though they may be gigantic. Here's where we really get under the hood.

The first stage in completing the books centers on brainstorming. Back when this started, it was the author and his newspaper friends. When we got the office in 1997, it was him and me and a bunch of whiteboards. After I moved to California (and he followed, getting a winter home in Pasadena), it's him, me, my sister, and Michele (his girlfriend).

Sandford usually comes to the table with an idea for what the newest book will be about. It's a very general idea, and sometimes ill-formed. Twice (but ONLY twice) we've preemptively shot down his general idea. In both cases it was because it required Lucas (Davenport, the star of the Prey series and Virgil Flowers' boss) to act so far out of character that it simply didn't work; it made him cross a moral event horizon after which the audience would no longer be rooting FOR him, but rather want him to fail. It made him into a bad guy.

But that's the exception. Usually he has an idea of what he wants, and the rough parts can be smoothed, or tinkered with, or altered. So we all get together for an afternoon and discuss What will the book be about? How will things play out? This is a very casual session... We're just throwing out random ideas, seeing what sticks, what works with the plot, what doesn't work at all... When that's done, the author goes ahead and writes the entire book. He's got the idea, he's got the plan, he's got the blueprint. The only thing remaining is the actual writing.

And then... It goes off the rails immediately. Every. Single. Time.

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One derailing factor is character based. What the author wanted them to do doesn't make any sense. Or, things fall apart when something else in the plot develops. Typically the author is three or four chapters in, and suddenly he has no idea how he's going to get to an endgame. So how did he get there? The first chapter typically centers on a murder—brutal, violent, and not quite explained. The second chapter is also mechanical in its development: it's what the author calls the furniture-moving chapter. You have to introduce the actual main character (in the case of Lucas, re-introduce), re-describe the house, the family, the job, the situation.

In the third chapter the actual investigation begins. For those who love a really good detective story, Sandford is a fantastic story teller who displays an innate detective's eye view on the unfolding drama.

Now the team brainstorms again. The second brainstorming session, and all the sessions after that, are no longer just "What Should The Book BE?" sessions. The author has a problem, and it needs to be solved. So we sit around, and we talk, and more ideas are introduced, and plot threads are developed, and the problem, eventually, is solved.

On goes the writing. Sandford writes linearly, seldom going back to make major changes unless it's essential. So he'll proceed to chapter ten or so before another brainstorming session is called. Again, the book moves forward. A team venture but ultimately the author's responsibility. Sometimes, however, something happens that causes a major change. A twist is added that makes perfect sense IF there's an antecedent for it in the book. But there isn't, and so there has to be backstory added into earlier chapters, and THAT can cause fallout in later chapters, and then things change and warp and...

Some of the brainstorming sessions are less structured. Sandford will call his son and daughter separately, describe the problem and let them mull it over for a few days. The siblings will confer and then tell him what they've figured out.

About a month before the deadline, Sandford will have a nearly complete draft and then the process enters the editing sequence. Sometimes the editor says there are major problems. Sometimes it's just light editing. Whatever the case is, he's got one month to fix it AND smooth down the rough edges on the rest of the book. The Sandford books are not meant to be fine literature that resonates with the deeper soul. They're meant to be readable and entertaining, and it's a nice bonus if you can be clever about it. Just clever enough.

Two days before the deadline, Sandford sends Ros and his sister final copies. They (independently) go over the book, highlighting every error or inconsistency they find. Sometimes a whole section requires heavy revisions but most of the changes at this point are minor. Ros then enters every change into the computer version.

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A month later, the publisher sends through the edits, the author approves them, and that's that. And then the whole thing starts over again.

Gee, nothing to it! At least not until one actually submerges in one of his thrillers. Then it just doesn't look so simple.

Next stop, the process of writing non-fiction!