



**JOHN
LESCROART**

**T. JEFFERSON
PARKER**

VS.

AMERICA'S FAVORITE SUSPENSE AUTHORS



FACEOFF



**ON THE RULES OF FICTION
ON THE USE OF PROLOGUES**

By Anthony J. Franze

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For the first time ever
the world's greatest thriller characters
meet head-to-head in 11 electrifying stories

FACEOFF

Dennis Lehane vs. Michael Connelly

Ian Rankin vs. Peter James

R. L. Stine vs. Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child

M. J. Rose vs. Lisa Gardner

Steve Martini vs. Linda Fairstein

Jeffery Deaver vs. John Sandford

Heather Graham vs. F. Paul Wilson

Raymond Khoury vs. Linwood Barclay

John Lescroart vs. T. Jefferson Parker

Steve Berry vs. James Rollins

Lee Child vs. Joseph Finder

Edited by **David Baldacci**

In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on "the rules" of fiction. For the next several months, Anthony will feature the authors of this June's highly anticipated "FaceOff," an anthology of short stories written by some of the biggest names in suspense.

Jack Reacher, meet Nick Heller. Lincoln Rhyme, meet Lucas Davenport.

This June, in an unprecedented collaboration, twenty-three of the world's bestselling writers will pair their beloved series characters in "FaceOff," an eleven-story anthology edited by none other than No. 1 *New York Times* bestselling author David Baldacci. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for readers," Baldacci said. "I'm honored to be at the helm of this amazing ship."

Two members of the dream team—John Lescroart and T. Jefferson Parker—joined forces to write "Silent Hunt," a tale Lescroart described as "a Mexican border fishing story mystery," featuring Lescroart's Wyatt Hunt character and Parker's Joe Trona. "We had a blast writing this story," Lescroart said. "We started it after we'd

both been on a fly fishing trip to Baja, California with a few other writers . . . We found that our characters were compatible guys, oddly both were anglers, and Jeff knew a lot about the Mexican cartels, so we started mapping out the story.” Both writers said they’d been longtime fans of one another’s work and jumped at the opportunity to collaborate.

Readers will have to wait for the book to see the Hunt/Trona face-off. In the interim, I convinced Lescroart and Parker to “face off” over something a little different—one of the late, great Elmore Leonard’s famous rules of writing.

IN DEFENSE OF THE PROLOGUE

In 2001, the *New York Times* published Elmore Leonard’s ten rules of writing, a set of pithy rules that later were published in a book illustrated by Joe Ciardiello. In one of the rules, Leonard advised writers to “avoid the prologue.” Leonard explained that “[a] prologue in a novel is backstory, and you can drop it in anywhere you want.” It’s advice that many writers and editors follow, some rigidly.

But not John Lescroart. He said he is a huge Elmore Leonard fan and has even given away copies of Leonard’s ten rules to aspiring writers. “But on prologues, I happen to think Elmore was wrong.”

Lescroart said that “prologues can be very effective because they allow the writer to provide backstory in a way that avoids lengthy exposition.” Those who study the craft know that Lescroart has his own acclaimed writing matrix (covered in this series at *Suspense*, Nov. 2012, Vol. 040), the first rule of which is “extricate exposition,” so it perhaps, should come as no surprise that Lescroart favors the prologue as another means to eradicate his dreaded foe.

Lescroart gave two examples in his own work where he felt a prologue improved the story. “I used one in ‘The 13th Juror’ and in many ways that book made my career.” The book had a main character on trial for murder who was fairly icy and unlikeable. “I wrote about one hundred pages and I realized that readers may not want to root for her since she was unsympathetic. And then I drafted the prologue.” The prologue showed Jennifer Witt not as a harsh woman, but as a nervous wreck, waiting for her husband to come home from work, worried that the house or dinner weren’t perfect and that she’d receive her next beating. “I couldn’t have put this in the narrative because it would’ve come out of nowhere, but the prologue allowed me to give some backstory that helped the reader understand the character and hopefully want to pull for her.”

More recently, Lescroart added a prologue to his latest page-turner, “The Ophelia Cut.” Lescroart said that this time the prologue came late and unexpected. “The publisher had galleys cut, the book was done, and the publisher thought it would be cool for me to have a short story to give away as part of the promo. I wrote it and when my agent and publisher read it they all said: ‘You gotta put that in as a prologue.’ They put it in and I was really pleased with it.” Lescroart said “The Ophelia Cut” prologue is one of those great times where the reader meets someone early on and then one hundred twenty pages later it ties in and they say, ‘Oh my God.’ ”

ELMORE HAD IT RIGHT

T. Jefferson Parker respectfully disagrees with his friend Lescroart about prologues. “For my first book, ‘Laguna Heat,’ I wanted to put in a prologue because I thought it sounded sophisticated. My editor saw it and suggested calling it ‘Chapter One,’ but he also said some words I’ll never forget: ‘If you want to tart up the book up with a prologue, go ahead.’” The book was published without a prologue.

“When I began as a writer I wanted to be a lavish prose guy; I thought a little more is more, I didn’t want to be a hard-boiled sparing writer, I wanted to be more descriptive. Oddly, thirty years later, I find myself trying to be more economical; to do more with less. So, for me, when I look at a prologue, I think, ‘Why not just call it Chapter One?’ If I can get rid of it, I will.” And so it was with his latest novel, the critically acclaimed “The Famous and the Dead,” which begins with a simple “1.”

Parker conceded, however, that there are rare occasions when a prologue works. And Parker, a self-described “recovering prologue-aholic,” has used them three times in twenty books. “I think Elmore was on to something when he said ‘avoid’ the prologue, which suggests there are times they can be effective.” For example, Parker said he thought a prologue was necessary and effective in his book, “The Border Lords.” There, Parker had an opening scene where a priest is in a cave filled with bats. “The bats are flying past him and he gets hold of one of them, studies it, puts in his jacket, and walks out of the cave; the reader doesn’t understand the connection or see him again for one hundred pages. I couldn’t have worked this into the main story narrative.”

But whenever possible, Parker still thinks writers should avoid the prologue. If backstory is needed, writers should try to weave it in along the way. “I generally think prologues can disrupt the story; when readers are paying more than twenty bucks for a book, they don’t need the toe stub.”

COUNTERPUNCH

Lescroart came back swinging, noting that prologues can be the opposite of a “toe stub.” Beyond providing a non-disruptive way to provide backstory, he said, “prologues can serve a vital purpose of providing a hook that pulls the reader in.” The prologue often involves one character and one important scene that sets the stage for the entire book. And again, Lescroart stressed, with backstory often comes exposition; with exposition often comes telling, not showing, and a prologue can help avoid it all.

Parker answered that the hook can come in other ways. And, on backstory, he agreed with what Elmore Leonard said in his ten rules: “you can drop (backstory) in anywhere you want.” But Parker added a point on which Lescroart readily agreed: “The beauty of being a writer is that, at the end of the day, there really are no rules if you can pull it off. If you go strictly by the rules you won’t add anything new or creative and it will just be the same thing over and over again.”

Both authors noted that in some of their favorite books, the authors broke “the rules.”

So, to prologue or not to prologue? Lescroart and Parker have their own preferences, but ultimately they said it is a choice each writer has to make for each particular book, guided, but not constrained, by the advice of those who have gone before them.

And these Baja fishing buddies think Elmore Leonard would have appreciated that. ■

Anthony J. Franze is the author of the debut legal thriller, “The Last Justice.” In addition to his writing, Anthony is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm where he has represented clients in more than thirty cases in the U.S. Supreme Court. Anthony also is an adjunct professor of law, a commentator for several news outlets, and an active member of the International Thriller Writers association where he Co-Chairs ITW’s Debut Authors Program, is the Awards Coordinator for the Thriller Awards, and is the Assistant Managing Editor of The Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children. Learn more about Anthony at <http://www.anthonyfranzebooks.com/>.