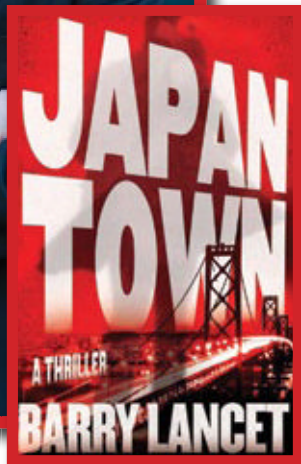




# America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

## *East Meets ~~West~~ Best:* Barry Lancet's Five Rules of Writing



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 Anthony sits down with editor-turned-breakout-author, Barry Lancet.*

It's rare that I profile debut authors for this series. After all, they haven't had a chance yet to become one of “America's favorite suspense authors.” Nor do first-time authors typically have the years of experience needed to give writing advice.

But Barry Lancet is different.

Lancet is one of the hottest debut authors of 2013. And after reading “Japantown”—his taut international thriller that races from San Francisco to Lancet's adopted hometown of Tokyo—I realized that it was a safe bet that he'll soon be on the “favorite” list. (I'm not alone: J.J. Abrams of *Lost* fame recently bought the TV rights to the book.)

Lancet also is no rookie in the writing game. He spent more than two decades as an editor at one of Japan's largest publishers, developing books on Japanese art, cuisine, history, martial arts, Asian philosophy, and many other aspects of Japanese life. His expertise in Japanese culture—and his experience inside the often impenetrable world of Japanese business—shine through in his atmospheric story of an American antique dealer who uses his



Japan expertise to help police try to solve a brutal crime committed in San Francisco's Japantown.

Lancet lives in Japan, but has spent the past several months in the U.S. to promote the novel. I was lucky enough to sit down with him and discuss his advice to aspiring scribes.

### 1. *Do something every day.*

Lancet started writing "Japantown" while working about seventy hours a week as an editor. During that time, he'd heard a recurring piece of advice from published fiction authors: "Write every day." Lancet said that the demands of his job, family, and the day-to-day grind prevented him from writing every day, so he decided on a more realistic goal: do *something* every day.

He committed to do one thing a day toward finishing the book, even if he couldn't write. "Many of us don't have the luxury to write every day," Lancet said. "So I decided to at least try to move the ball forward in a small way each day, whether it was organizing my notes, looking up some small fact on the Internet, coming up with a line of dialogue, or simply thinking about my plot or characters. Whether I had five minutes or five hours, I just made a point to do something."

Lancet said that the small things add up and, even if you can't write on a given day, doing something keeps your head in the story. Lancet wrote much of the initial draft of "Japantown" on scraps of paper while standing up on a crowded Japanese commuter train. "Those ten to twenty minutes crammed in the train paid returns and it kept me moving forward, even if just a little at a time. If I'd thought I had to write every day to become a novelist, I would have given up. You shouldn't. You don't need to write every day, but you need to do *something*."

### 2. *Make the good guy smart, but the bad guy smarter.*

As for writing advice, Lancet said that the best single piece of advice he could give new suspense writers is to make their protagonist highly intelligent—but make the antagonist even more so. "This challenges the writer to ratchet up the story on nearly every level. If the bad guy continually outfoxes the hero, it forces the writer to get more creative." How can the hero get the better of someone who is, well, better? "Figuring that out leads to upgrades in your plot, in your dialogue, and in your action." Lancet said that doing this also helps the writer create more memorable characters. "When the writer puts his or her protagonist up against a formidable adversary, the reader can't wait to see what both sides will do next."

### 3. *Write around problems.*

Before Lancet began writing full-time, one of his jobs as an editor was to help his nonfiction authors through the barriers they encountered. One way to break through tough spots, he found, was for authors to lose their inner perfectionist; to write without feeling the need to fill in all the details or make things perfect as they went along.

For fiction, Lancet similarly believes in momentum over perfection when writing first drafts. "Writers shouldn't stop to put in a description of a locale or what a person looks like if they are writing fast and furious or if they just don't feel like filling in certain details along the way. Put in a note to yourself to come back later."



If the writer is “in the zone” it’s better to keep the story moving and clean up the rest later. “You don’t want to mess up the flow or tension by stopping to focus on some detail you can address some other time. And often, when you come back, you can make the minor details you’ve written around better than they would have been if you’d stopped along the way.”

## 4. *When you get stuck, write your hero into a corner.*

Regarding more fundamental barriers in writing fiction, Lancet said something that helped him was to “write the hero into a corner, some situation that seems to have no way out—then get him or her out of it.” Lancet said that for “Japantown,” he wrote Jim Brodie into several tough spots and then would spend days just thinking about how to get him out of it. “Putting a character’s back against the wall forces you to think outside the box and pushes you creatively. At a minimum, it keeps the engine idling and gives you something to focus on while you’re stuck.”

## 5. *Double-back and re-review.*

Double what, and re-what? Lancet said the best editing advice he gleaned from his twenty-five years of experience is to edit a chapter, then immediately double back and edit the same chapter again. “It’s hard to edit your own work. Something about doubling back and re-reviewing the same chapter right away after you’re familiar with it, gives you a better perspective. I sometimes get my best lines of dialogue or best details after I double back and re-review.”

Lancet said he usually edits a small chunk of related chapters (anywhere from one to about three chapters) and then immediately goes back and reads and edits them again. He also mixes it up, sometimes editing on the screen, sometimes editing on paper. “You see different things when you read on a screen versus reading on paper. There’s no substitute for editing both ways.”

With a multi-book deal from Simon & Schuster, foreign sales, television rights, and starred reviews, Lancet is doing something right. And I predict that soon one of Japan’s resident writers will soon become one of America’s favorites. Stay tuned. ■

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