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SWITCHING CHANNELS

TV Journalist HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN Gets 'Air Time' for Her Newest Release

By Amanda Woytus

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, when people asked Hank Phillippi Ryan what she did for a living, the investigative reporter would simply reply, "Television." Two years, three mystery novels and several awards later, the novelist now adds "author" to her response.

"I have found incredible new momentum and enthusiasm in doing something else I've always wanted to do," says the 59-year-old, Emmy-winning journalist about her second career as a mystery novelist. Her most recent release, *Air Time* (Sept., Mira), is the third in her Charlotte McNally series.

The author developed an interest in books at a young age and refers to Nancy Drew — the teenage sleuth every young book-worm wants to be — as her first best friend.



She went on to study English at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, then entered politics, working as an assistant press secretary in Indianapolis, until she "decided to try life on the other side of the microphone."

She got her first broadcasting job as a radio reporter for WIBC in Indianapolis, but her path was hardly typical. Having no journalism experience, she reminded the station manager that his license was up

for renewal with the FCC and there were no women working there, which would have resulted in the station losing its license. Ryan got the job.

She then moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked as a legislative aide, and later as an editorial assistant for *Rolling Stone*. She began her television career in Indianapolis and worked in Atlanta before taking a job as a reporter in 1982 for Boston's Channel 7 News, where she now works as an investigative reporter. Throughout her journalism career, writing mystery and suspense novels remained in the back of her mind, until the day she accidentally opened a spam e-mail.

"The subject line of the spam was 'Help with refinancing' or something like that," Ryan says. "But the body of the e-mail looked like lines from Shakespeare. I was instantly intrigued. Why, I wondered, would someone put lines from Shakespeare in an obvious spam e-mail about refinancing? The thought crossed my mind: I bet it's a secret message."

That spam was the inspiration for her first Charlotte McNally mystery, *Prime Time* (2007, Harlequin Next). The book won an Agatha Award for best first mystery, an *RT* Reviewers' Choice Award and was nominated for two RITAs and a Daphne.

Starting her first novel seemed easy. But Ryan admits that after her husband, Jonathan, read the first 50 pages of her manuscript and asked if anything was going to happen soon, it dawned on her that she had no idea what she was doing.

"I've never done anything so difficult. And I've never done anything so rewarding. Character development? Story arc? Conflict? Structure? Plot and pacing? You name it, I didn't know it. I decided I wouldn't try to build a house without consulting an architect and I wouldn't try to make a soufflé without a recipe, so I did some reading and took a class about the craft of writing and the structure of the mystery novel. I kept going, though, through the learning process."

Ryan's inexperience with fiction writing, not to mention the two years it took her to write and revise her first novel, didn't stop the author from tackling her new career with an optimistic attitude.

"It's glorious. It's hilarious. It's wonderful. It's astonishingly time-consuming. At my age, when many people are contemplating retirement, I hope I'm beginning a whole new career," Ryan says. "I see my life in a different way now. Every door is open. Everything is possible. It's not as if I've reinvented myself. It's just that, in a combination of



hard work and luck, part of myself that was a little behind the scenes has emerged into reality."

With two Charlotte McNally mysteries under her belt, things were going well for Ryan. She had a moment of panic in 2007 when she learned that Harlequin was canceling the Next line, but even that couldn't shake her success. Less than a month later, she learned that Mira was picking up her series.

"On paper, it looks like a hiatus," Ryan says of the two-year lag time between new releases. "In real life, it's nothing like that."

In addition to writing her fourth book, *Drive Time*, which will be out in February 2010, she threw herself into appearances and conventions while serving on the board of directors of the New England chapters of Sisters in Crime and the Mystery Writers of America. She also continued to blog at the Jungle Red Writers and Femmes Fatales. With a packed appearance schedule and her other full-time job, the two years flew by, but Ryan used the time to her advantage.

"I have used every second of that time to keep in touch with readers, reporters and fans," she says. "When you love something as much as I do, it's a pleasure."

Air Time, which received four stars in the September issue of *RT*, focuses on the theme of authenticity. In her professional life, Charlie reveals the seedy underbelly of the fashion industry by infiltrating the realm of fake couture while wrestling with doubts about the authenticity of her love life.

Ryan looked to her own experiences as inspiration for *Air Time*, as she has for her previous books. Although the shootout in the airport hangar that takes place in *Air Time* came straight from her imagination, the author says it's fair to picture her in the situations Charlie finds herself in. Wiring Charlie with a hidden camera in order to expose the world of knock-offs, for instance, came from Ryan's reporting career — close calls included.

"When you're wired with a hidden camera, there's no room for mistakes. And I'm pretty good at disguises and undercover work. But there's always the moment when even with the best of planning, someone gets suspicious. I was almost caught infiltrating a cult church — almost. There was a time a quack doctor seemed to be suspicious, but I hightailed it out of his office before he could ask any questions. We've had some narrow escapes inside puppy and kitten mills. And like Charlie, I've carried a hidden camera into those 'purse parties,' where people are selling knock-off designer bags. I've done several investigative stories on those, and that's why I sent Charlie into that glamorous, and illegal, world in *Air Time*," Ryan says.

Since Charlie isn't hanging up her handbag any time soon, Ryan is entertaining big ideas for her heroine. "It would be fun to see Charlie get married — to someone. And I wonder what would happen if she gets a big job offer from the network? But I also have some other ideas percolating for new characters and new adventures. So, we'll see what happens. And what readers want."

For those who want to know Ryan's secret to balancing two careers and a personal life, the key seems to be sacrifice. "I have the luxury of having a full-time job that I still love, and I can still work at my day job (although a TV day is 24/7) while I'm writing," Ryan says. "Problem is, there's never enough time. I often wonder what it would be like to lead a real writing life — wake up in the morning, have delicious coffee, go to my office and work on my next novel. But now, I rush to Channel 7 each morning, work a full day on my real job, then rush back home in the evening, write for a few hours, make dinner for my very patient husband and then write some more."

The author still gets goose bumps when she sees her books in libraries or bookstores. And for those who long for the same satisfaction, she says to go for it. "There's a quote on my bulletin board: 'What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?' My advice to anyone who wants to branch out and step into their dreams? Read that. Realize that the choice is yours. And then do it," Ryan says. "And let me know what happens." ♦

Learn more at the author's website: HankPhillippiRyan.com.

EXCERPT FROM AIR TIME

"Call the police,"
Josh demands.

"Now."

After almost a year together, I've seen him tired, almost drunk, in bed with a fever, bored, passionate, cheering for the Red Sox, playing Twister with Penny. But I've never seen him this angry.

"If you don't call the police," Josh says, unwrapping his arm from around my shoulders and leaving me, longing, on my midnight blue leather couch, "you're simply allowing yourself to be in danger. That's not 'intrepid tough reporter.' That's absurd."

I'm simmering a bit myself. Isn't this the part where Prince Charming is supposed to draw his sword and protect me from evil-doers? I'm the one who just got threatened in a nasty phone call.

But maybe he needs something, too. Coming up behind him, I prop my chin on his shoulder. "I'm so glad you came over, sweetheart. You're right, I was going to call the cops when the guy was on the phone."

"The last time you had a 'good story,' you were chased down the interstate by murdering thugs," Josh continues. His voice is cold. "Then held at gunpoint. Twice. A 'good story' almost got your own mother killed, just two months ago, and now —"

"Well, no, that's not quite accurate." I take a step back, and I feel a frown creasing my forehead.

"It is." Josh shrugs. "I know you're devoted to your job. And scoring yet another Emmy. But if someone is calling you at home, threatening you, how can I protect you? How can I protect any of us?"

"Well, in TV news, you know, 'good' is kind of relative, and —"

"Let me finish. If we're a team? You and me and Penny? You can't be putting us in danger. If they know where you are, they'd know where she is."

Josh is eyeing the front door. I've lost my luggage. That I can handle. But now, what if I'm about to lose the love of my life?

