

Reading Between the Lies:

HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN

on “Trust Me”

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*
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Ten books. Five Agathas. Two Anthonys. Two Macavitys. The Daphne. A Mary Higgins Clark Award. The numbers (and names) speak for themselves, and Hank Phillippi Ryan’s legacy is only destined to grow with the publication of her first standalone novel of suspense, “Trust Me” (Forge). It’s an impressive list of accolades, and one that’s further bolstered by the author’s longstanding role as an on-air investigative reporter for Boston’s WHDH-TV, which has garnered her 34 EMMYs, 14 Edward R. Murrow Awards, and dozens of other recognitions for her groundbreaking journalism.

Despite the enormity of her literary achievements, fiction came as a second act career for Ryan, who continues to work in the pursuit of facts by day. She published her first novel, “Prime Time,” in 2007. That title won an Agatha Award and introduced protagonist

Charlotte (“Charlie”) McNally, a scrappy Boston television reporter of a certain age, who would be featured in three subsequent books: “Face Time,” “Air Time,” and “Drive Time”—all available in new editions. Then, embattled journalist Jane Ryland stepped into the spotlight with “The Other Woman,” which won the prestigious Mary Higgins Clark Award and was the year’s only release to be nominated for the Agatha, Anthony, Macavity, Shamus and Daphne awards for Best Novel of 2012; “The Wrong Girl,” “Truth Be Told,” “What You See,” and “Say No More” followed.

This year, Hank Phillippi Ryan charts a bold new course with the highly anticipated publication of “Trust Me”—a taut, cat-and-mouse thriller that unites a grieving journalist and an accused murderer in their elusive search for truth. Booklist awarded the title a starred review, noting: “It’s a knockout...First-rate psychological suspense.” Further, *New York Times* bestselling author Mary Kubica enthused, “The tension mounts at a blistering pace, while Ryan dazzles on the page, weaving a sinister story that readers won’t be able to put down. A must read!”

“Trust Me” has already been named a *New York Post* Best Thriller of the Summer, a BookBub Top Summer Thriller of 2018, a POPSUGAR Top Summer Thriller, and a CrimeReads Most Anticipated Thriller of 2018.

Now, Hank Phillippi Ryan dares you to read between the lies ...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “Trust Me” is your first standalone novel. What inspired you to step outside series fiction, and how did you find the process to differ from your previous experiences?

Hank Phillippi Ryan (H.P.R.): *Writing a standalone is so astonishingly different! The idea for “Trust Me” came when the stories of two murder trials I had covered seemed to converge and intertwine and become a story on their own linked together. I knew*

it was not a Jane Ryland series book.

I knew a standalone, to me at least, meant the story of the most incredibly, profoundly, important event that had ever happened to the main character. It would be a one-time only story, uniquely structured, and where absolutely anything could happen. In a standalone, I knew there was no holding back, it all went on the table, and frankly anyone could die or be guilty. And when I started writing, I had no idea who that would be. I was surprised on every page. It was incredibly exciting.

J.B.V.: The story features an unlikely alliance between two characters: an accused killer and a bereaved journalist. In what ways is this dynamic mutually beneficial—and how does it also serve to heighten the stakes?

H.P.R.: Janet Malcolm had the greatest quote. She said, “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible.” Is that true? I’ve wondered about that so often as a journalist, the lengths we’ll go to get the story, and what we’ll say. Always true, as far as I’m concerned, but to what end?

So in “Trust Me,” the journalist, Mercer Hennessey, is absolutely convinced that murder defendant, Ashland Bryant, is guilty. And sets out to use all of her reporter tricks to get Ashlyn to confess. Will Ashlyn fall for that? Or is Ashlyn manipulating that reporter’s need for the big scoop to gain her own advantage?

And underlying it all, what if Mercer is wrong and Ashland actually is innocent? Or...what if she isn’t?

J.B.V.: One of the book’s underlying themes is the subjectivity of truth. In what ways does psychological suspense differ from tension that is of a more visceral, or physiological nature—and how does this influence your approach to unreliable narration?

H.P.R.: Oh, yes, this was the most incredibly interesting and fun part to write. In a psychological suspense novel, it’s all about manipulation and deception, right? We watch Charles Boyer fiddle with the gaslight to drive Ingrid Bergman crazy. We wonder if the milk that Cary Grant is bringing to Joan Fontaine in Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* is really poisoned, the way she fears it is, or maybe...it isn’t?

This ‘twisty-turny’ examination of how far somebody would go to get what they want by simply destabilizing what the other person believes, is just as terrifying as any ‘bang-bang’ car chase. And as for unreliable narration: Both my narrators are completely and totally reliable. Just ask them. I mean, seriously, they are! Because one of the profound ideas I’m playing with in this book is—is it the truth if you believe it? What does “the truth” even mean? And I realize there are three sides to every story: yours, mine, and the truth. And in “Trust Me,” I dare you to find the liar.

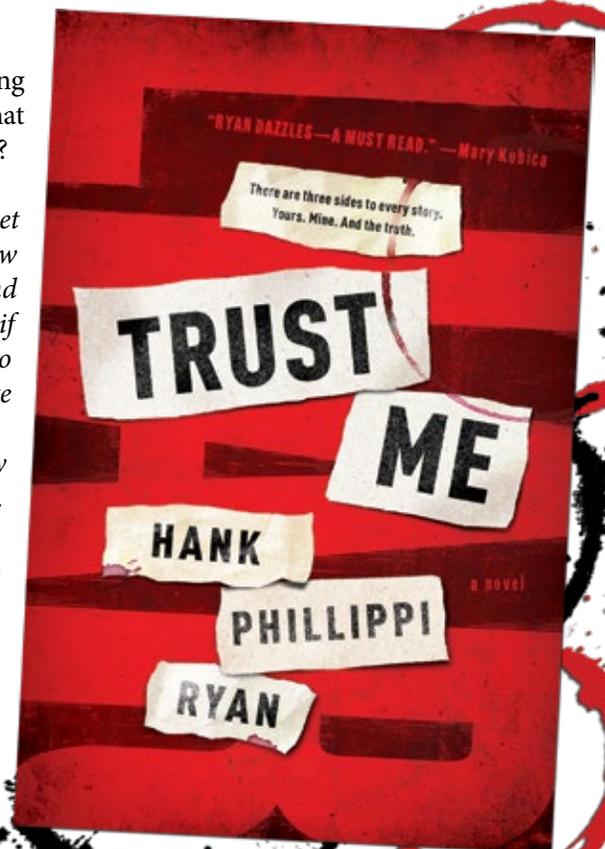
J.B.V.: Plot twists inevitably abound. Do you pre-plan these game-changing moments or do they develop more organically? And, in your opinion, what is the key(s) to achieving an ending that is both satisfying and surprising?

H.P.R.: I preplanned it. Ha! Wrong, wrong, wrong. I knew from the outset I wanted to illustrate that no matter what a reporter does, no matter how honorable they are, it is incredibly difficult to keep our own emotions and beliefs out of a story. Good journalists are vigilant about that, but what if an indelible emotion, like grief, or guilt, is stronger than we are? I have to confess, in “Trust Me,” I had no idea what was going to happen until I wrote the next line and the next paragraph.

This book surprised me constantly, as did the actions of both of my main characters. And, in fact, a couple of the supporting characters as well. Breathtakingly so.

The pitfall in writing that way is that at some point there needs to be a blockbuster ending, one that’s surprising and yet ties up every single loose end. And in every book I write, that is my challenge.

When I figured out the ending of “Trust Me,” I was alone in my study, and I stood up and applauded myself. Embarrassing, yes, but it suddenly occurred to me—and I do mean suddenly, because 30 seconds earlier I hadn’t figured it out—what had happened. And there it was. It almost brought tears to my eyes.



J.B.V.: Boston is a familiar backdrop in your books. How do you view setting as enhancing a story—and in what ways do you attempt to capture the essence of the city on the page and bring it to life for readers?

H.P.R.: *I am so lucky to work in Boston, in the big and bustling metropolis, but live just outside the city in a little town. Boston is endlessly intriguing, with history around every corner and all kinds of secrets, and different ways of life in every neighborhood. My town is small, and people know each other, and you can walk to the drug store and pizza place and the movies.*

One of the things I love about “Trust Me” is that it takes place not only in a historic Boston courthouse, and a little (fictional) suburban town, but is also almost a locked room mystery—these two strong women play a cat-and-mouse game but, of necessity, unable to leave the house—one because she does not want to face her neighbors, and the other does not want to be recognized. So they stay holed up inside, creating a true crime novel, one writing, one revealing, facing off to prove their truth. It’s suffocating and suspenseful and dangerous, and that makes it all the more disturbing.

J.B.V.: Crime fiction is meant to entertain, but there are elements that ground these types of books in reality. What topical issues do you endeavor to explore through the creative lens—and what is the balance between entertainment and enlightenment?

H.P.R.: *Oh, you are so right! My first job as a crime fiction author is to entertain. I want you to miss your stop on the subway because you are so riveted by “Trust Me.” I want you to stay up late at night reading it, and even be sad when the pilot announces you are coming in for landing, because you want to read just more chapter.*

But this book started when I heard my defense attorney husband practicing his closing arguments in a notorious murder case. I was completely convinced the story he was telling was true, and utterly persuaded the jury could only find his client not guilty.

But then I imagined the wife of the prosecutor, practicing his closing argument in the same case, and his wife believing what he was saying—the exact opposite of what my husband was saying—was true.

And I thought...How could two smart people take exactly the same evidence and create two exactly opposite stories? And that’s exactly what I do in “Trust Me.”

When they close the last page, I hope readers will understand that the truth has many forms: just because someone says something over and over doesn’t mean it’s true. Just because someone believes something doesn’t make it true. And as Mercer Hennessey, my journalist, wonders: How can you write a true story if there’s no way to know what’s true?

J.B.V.: You are a decorated investigative reporter. In what ways does this background inform your career in fiction, both in terms of discipline and how you conceptualize and frame a story?

H.P.R.: *Thank you, yes! And when I have a bad writing day, I look at all those Emmys and Agatha teapots, and remember—hey. There was a time I could do it, so maybe I could do it again. On the days when I begin to fear I cannot write anymore, I say wait, I was good once, maybe I can be good again. Crazy, huh?*

I’ve been a television reporter for 40 years, isn’t that amazing? I have wired myself with hidden cameras, confronted corrupt politicians, chased down criminals, gone undercover and in disguise. But, most important to my fiction career, I have essentially written a story every day. With a beginning, middle and end, with characters you care about, and an important problem that needs to be solved. I want the good guys to win, and the bad guys to get what’s coming to them. And in the end, I want to change the world and get some justice. And that is exactly what I do in my novels! Turns out, I’ve been learning to write them for forty years. And the result is “Trust Me.” (Which the Booklist starred review calls “a knockout.”)

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

H.P.R.: *What’s next? Oh, my goodness, in the run-up to book tour, every day is crazy! “Trust Me” is a Best of Summer for the New York Post, and Crime Reads, and POPSUGAR, and BookBub. Hooray! I’m about to leave on a fabulous cross-country book tour, and I hope you all will come say hello. I am looking forward to it like crazy...I drag my little rolling suitcase through airport corridors, humming Magical Mystery Tour.*

And I am happily writing the next book, which comes out, if all goes as planned, next year. It’s called “The Murder List.” Another psychological standalone—crossing fingers!

For more information on Hank’s upcoming tour and release, head to www.hankphillippiryan.com. ■