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FEATURES, LATEST BOOKS

Up Close: Hank Phillippi Ryan

2 WEEKS AGO *by* R.G. BELSKY

Ryan Shifts Focus Away from Journalism in New Thriller

By **R. G. Belsky**

THE MURDER LIST is the highly-anticipated new thriller from bestselling author Hank Phillippi Ryan, who never seems to slow down.

She is also a multi-award-winning Boston TV journalist with an amazing 36 Emmys and dozens of other on-air honors; she works tirelessly to support other writers on the popular Jungle Red website and other social media; she will be the Guest of Honor at Bouchercon 2019, the worldwide mystery conference; and, oh yes, she even somehow has managed to get a recurring role as a character in the Spenser novels.



How does she find time to do it all?

"I have to admit—the answer is not that glamorous. I just...work all the time. It's ridiculous. Ask my husband. (Or on the other hand, don't.) When I started writing, twelve years ago, I worked every night after my day job, all weekend, and during all vacations. I didn't take a vacation (and neither did my husband as a result) for at least six years. And he did not complain once.

"As the books have taken off, crossing fingers, I've evolved to focus more on my writing skills. How do I learn to get better? To be more specific, more compelling, more evocative? I've been a television reporter for 43 years, yikes, and I'm still proud of our stories, we still get nominated for Emmys (and we *just* won two more!), and I'm still immersed in it. But now I find myself yearning to be at my writing desk."

THE MURDER LIST is a departure from the Mary Higgins Clark, Anthony and five-time Agatha Award winner's previous thrillers because this one focuses on the legal profession, instead of journalists.



Hank Phillippi Ryan interviewing Sue Grafton.

Law student Rachel North—married to high-powered defense attorney Jack Kirkland—goes to work as a summer intern in the office of District Attorney Martha Gardiner, a longtime courtroom foe of her husband. A hugely important murder trial then makes everyone choose a side—with explosive and shocking results.

"Whether it's journalism or the law—it's all about justice for me. In THE MURDER LIST, it's Rachel and Jack and Martha—a twisty triple triangle of suspense," Ryan says. "Each one: hard-charging experienced and powerful prosecutor Martha, brilliant and manipulative defense attorney Jack, and novice newbie law student Rachel has a specific (and very personal) idea of justice. It's a cat and mouse (and cat!) game; that's what I wanted the story to show. But which ones are the cats and which are the mice? More than that I cannot say."

Ryan talks about how she drew heavily upon her real-life experiences covering courtrooms as a TV reporter—as well as from her husband, who is a lawyer—for the story in THE MURDER LIST.



Hank Phillippi Ryan accepting an Emmy award.

“I’ve covered so many trials—VonBulow, Casey Anthony, the one that became A Civil Action. I’ve seen my defense-attorney husband work nonstop, studying and researching and poring over transcripts, utterly obsessed. I’ve also talked with devoted prosecutors, equally focused on making sure bad guys come to justice. How did their minds work? What might push them to go too far? How far can they manipulate the rules? How malleable is a jury? It’s all about how we get to justice, and how we get to the truth, and I think there’s nothing more intriguing and important than that.”

She also points out that THE MURDER LIST title she used for the book is based on authentic courtroom background too. “The murder list is a real thing, and my husband is on it. It’s the list of lawyers who are experienced and benevolent enough to be appointed to represent indigent murder clients for a reduced fee—to ensure they get the best possible representation. And that’s what it means in the book, too. At least—it’s one thing it means.”

One of the skills Ryan is famed for in her books is all the twists that she shocks the reader with—and THE MURDER LIST is definitely filled with one stunning twist after another. How does she plan them all out?



Hank Phillippi Ryan with Ian Rankin
Photo credit: Bill Brett (The Boston Globe)

“I’m delighted that you called them stunning twists,” she says. “How do I plan them?”

What is this word ‘plan’ that you are using? I don’t outline, not at all. I have no idea what’s going to happen until I write the next word and the next sentence, and the next scene. How does that work? As a reporter, I spend my days searching for the great story. And that’s what I do as a fiction writer, too.

“In fact, that’s what entices me to the computer every day, to find out what happens next.

People say to me: Wow, the ending of *THE MURDER LIST*! You really surprised me. And I say yeah, wasn’t that a surprise? Talk about a

surprise ending—I *always* surprise myself. Sue Grafton once told me that was ‘writer magic,’ and I believe it.”

Okay, as both a journalist and a thriller author myself, what I really wanted to hear from Ryan was which type of writing she enjoyed the most—fiction or non-fiction. (And, for whatever it’s worth, her answer was the same as mine.)

“There is no liking one better—that’s impossible. I love storytelling, creating a good compelling fast-paced riveting story, one that’s entertaining, and important, and changes the world. And see? The only thing that’s different between fact and fiction is that in TV I don’t get to make stuff up. In fact, that’s one thing I feared when I first started writing. After all those years of reporting absolute fact, I wondered if my imagination would let me create something entirely fictional. Turned out that was the joy of my life. But I never get them confused, okay?”

THE MURDER LIST is her second standalone thriller (following last year’s Agatha-nominated *Trust Me*) after writing two different series characters. What’s the difference for her?



Hank Phillippi Ryan at home.
Photo credit: Chitose Suzuki

“The differences between writing a series and a standalone are astonishing, and I learned more about them as I wrote *Trust Me*, my first standalone. In my Jane Ryland and Charlotte McNally series, the suspense of the stories can’t come from the fear that the main character will die, right? Because she’s got to be back in the next book. So a series author must work to create tension and conflict to keep readers intrigued and turning the pages, even with the certain knowledge that the main character will survive and prevail. If you think about it, that’s quite a challenge.

“But in a standalone, wow. Anything could happen. Anything is possible. Any character could be a good guy, anyone could be lying, and anyone could die. *Anyone*. That’s power.”

She also talks about how much she enjoys all the social media work she does with authors on the Jungle Red Writers website and other platforms.

“Can you believe Jungle Red has been around for 10 years?” Ryan says. “We just hit six million views. Jungle Red, and the other fabulous blog I’m part of, Career Authors, are treasures. Yes, they require a lot of work, but being able to connect with the readers and writers while sitting at my desk in sweatpants is pretty fabulous. We’re so often alone, all of us, and it’s a wonderful way to stay connected.”

And, if all that wasn't enough, she has also appeared—as herself, a Boston TV investigative reporter—as a bit player in the long-running popular Spenser series, now written by Ace Atkins since Robert B. Parker's death.

“Oh my goodness, it was such a surprise!” she said. “And it's only because of Ace Atkins's diabolical brain. The first time I saw it, I was on an airplane on book tour, and I burst out laughing. The guy in the seat next to me said: what's so funny? And I had to explain that I was reading a Spenser book, and that my name was in it, and that Ace Atkins was the funniest person I'd ever met. I do love it, but it's also kind of weird. My brain had a hard time grasping seeing my name on the page as *me*, but not *me*.”



Hank Phillippi Ryan at a signing event.
Photo credit: Steve Bucci

What's next for Ryan?

“I am still soaring over the success of the upcoming *THE MURDER LIST*, so excited about the wonderful response. And it's such a potentially controversial book—I can't wait to get out and talk about it.

“Now? I'm working on my next standalone. It's another psychological thriller, with manipulation and deception and gaslighting and twists. And twists again. This new book is about revenge, and how the damage we bear in our childhoods can fester into an obsession for power and control and revenge, even in the most well-meaning person. At least, I *think* that's what it's about—I'm only halfway through, so who knows. Let me know when you read it!”