

REGAN  
COMMUNICATIONS  
GROUP

# The Boston Globe

February 14, 2024

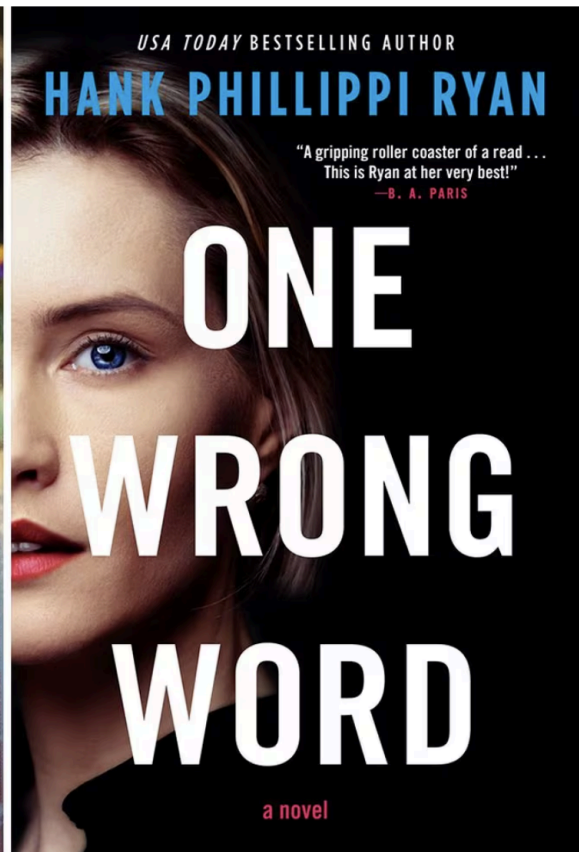
UVP: 4,970,820

[Link](#)

## BOOKS

### For Hank Phillippi Ryan, serendipity is a power for good, in writing and life

The award-winning mystery writer believes in the power of randomness.



Hank Phillippi Ryan, author of "One Wrong Word." FORD PRIMARY HEADSHOT/FORGE BOOKS

As the old saying goes, there are two types of novelists: plotters — who meticulously detail — and pantsers, who fly by the seat of their pants.

Hank Phillippi Ryan is a pantser — in more ways than one.

“My husband and I don’t celebrate the anniversary of the day we met — we celebrate the anniversary of the day before we met,” Ryan says in a recent phone interview from her West Newton home. “We call that ‘You-Never-Know Day.’ Because you never know what’s around the next corner. That’s how my whole life has been.”

The 37-time Emmy-winning Boston investigative reporter and multiple [award-winning mystery writer](#) didn’t start writing mysteries until she was 55, she says — and all because of one random spam email. (More on that below.) And she doesn’t plot any of her twists or turns. (More on that, too.)

Her 15th novel, “[One Wrong Word](#)” hit shelves recently. Like many of Ryan’s books, it’s a thriller set in Boston — this one involving Boston crisis management expert Arden Ward, who, about to lose her job, has one last chance to protect her future by helping a real-estate mogul accused of killing a skateboarder while driving drunk. But is she also protecting a killer?

We spoke to Ryan about her non-plotting, how she’s like a magpie with a Rubik’s Cube, mixing up Boston geography — and why you just might find your name in one of her books.

### **So what sparked this story?**

I’m fascinated by people who make their living convincing other people what to think: public relations people, crisis management experts, spinners and fixers. I’ve worked with them for years as a reporter. Some are honorable and wise and helpful, and others are not.

Another thing fascinating to me is, when there’s a notorious trial, how often the court of public opinion doesn’t *really* believe they didn’t do it. When a powerful person is acquitted of a crime, the skepticism level of the public goes into the red-zone. I was trying to come up with a situation where a powerful person felt they were going to be vindicated by a not-guilty verdict, but it didn’t matter.

**How do you typically plot your books?**

I do not plot. I type the words, “Chapter One,” and think: “Let’s see what happens now.” All the reveals and twists surprise me, too. That’s what gets me to the computer every day — I can’t wait to figure out what happened. It’s a tightrope. Every time I write a novel, I’m out in search of the story.

**Have you ever reported a news story and thought: That could fit into a book one day?**

Every one of my novels stems from an experience I’ve had in real life as a reporter, but they’re not [actual reported] stories made into fiction. I’m like a magpie. I take a little bit from this story, a little bit from that story, a little bit from my own personal experience, and twist and tweak like a Rubik’s Cube until it turns into a completely different picture.

**You’re about to tour for this book, but you said you already turned in your next?**

Book 16 is called “All This Could Be Yours.” It comes out next year. It’s about an author on a book tour who realizes she has a destructive and manipulative stalker who is trying to not only derail her career, but destroy her family back home. So I’ll be trying not to think about that.

**In the acknowledgments to “One Wrong Word,” you write: “Do you see your name in this book? Some very generous souls allowed their names to be used in return for an auction donation to charity. To retain the magic, I will let you find yourselves.”**

Sometimes for charity auctions, I auction off a character name. The money goes to charity and the person gets to see their name in the book.

**Have you always done this?**

Since my first book. It’s hilarious, because, remember: I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know who’s good, who’s bad, who’s guilty. I’ll never make an auction-name the victim. I try to make them good guys. One auction-name in this book turned out to be not the best person. I had to email them: My edit deadline is approaching, and your character turned out to be someone that you personally might not want to be. They were thrilled. They said: Leave it.

**You also write in the acknowledgments that you “tweaked Massachusetts geography a bit.”**

When something bad happens, I don’t give a specific address because I don’t want there to be murder in a place we recognize. So I’ll add a hotel or a street number that doesn’t exist on Beacon Street to make it feel real, but not someplace that you can go track down.

### **So what sparked you to write your first novel at 55?**

I was at Channel 7 and opened a spam email by mistake. It said: A new refinancing deal for you. But the body of the email looked like lines from a Shakespearean play. I thought: Why would someone put lines from a Shakespearean-era play in a spam email about refinancing? And my writer brain said: What if it's a secret message? I thought, "Secret messages in computer spam! That is a great idea for a novel."

I went home and said to my husband, "Sweetheart, I'm going to write a book!" And — I can't really explain the level of skepticism on his face — he said "Great, honey. Do you know how to write a book?"

### **Did that first book, "Prime Time," come easily?**

It did initially, although I had no idea what I was doing. The first draft was 723 pages. But it turned out fine. It's still in print. All because of one random moment on one random day when one random thing happened. That's how my books are written. Toss a pebble in the pond, and the ripples flow out.

*Hank Phillippi Ryan will be in conversation with Joseph Finder at [Newtonville Books](#) on Thursday, Feb. 15, and speaking at the virtual [International Thriller Writers](#) Town Hall on Sunday, March 3. More information at [hankphillippiryan.com](http://hankphillippiryan.com).*