

# You're getting it wrong

Experts debunk oft-used clichés in genre fiction.

**D**avid Baldacci shakes his head, deep dimples creasing his boyish cheeks. “I’ve read a lot of serial killer books by my contemporaries,” he says. “In so many of them, there’s no motivation for the bad guys other than they’re just crazy. They just slaughter people for the sake of slaughtering them. They kidnap women and imprison them and kill them later just because they’re nuts. Well, that’s pretty easy to write: ‘I killed these people because I’m nuts.’”

It might be easy to write that way. Usually, though, it’s wrong.

Veracity in fiction is often sacrificed on the altar of expedience. It’s a shame, because time spent fact-checking not only eliminates laughable gaffes but also keeps readers turning pages in the believable world created by the author.

With his background as a lawyer, Baldacci has been able to realistically portray legal scenes in his novels. But most of his characters come from other walks of life. What steps does he take to ensure his stories ring true?

“For both *Split Second* and *Hour Game*,” Baldacci explains, “I had a number of interviews with a number of different Secret Service agents. When I sat down with them right here in this room...” He pauses to spread his arms inside his spacious office in Fairfax, Virginia. “...I didn’t have a bunch of standard questions to ask. I just wanted them to give me a slice of their daily life in the Secret Service. *What you do from when you get up in the morning until you go to bed? How does it differ being in the field versus being on protection detail?* That way, when I sat down to write, I could give that sort of authenticity to my characters,” he says.

“And you can’t do that by just

reading about it in a book; you just can’t. A book might have told me that they all wear ear fobs when they’re standing post, but not about them getting static and having a hard time hearing. They wear body armor, and the wires itch them underneath the body armor and there’s nothing they can do about it. They’re sweating profusely under the body armor, and the wires short out sometimes because there’s so much moisture on their bodies. Nobody writes those things down in a book. You learn that by going out and talking to these guys, picking their brains in great detail and learning what they do.”

The good news for mystery writers is that vetting their work is easy to achieve. “Cop talk” books, such as *Police Procedure & Investigations* by Lee Lofland, provide an excellent starting point. But nothing beats fact-checking your scenes with authorities. This step not only ensures authenticity but also often provides you with wonderful, specific details you might otherwise never have known. Most experts are eager to share behind-the-scenes details of what they do. Need proof? I contacted a handful from various fields and asked which mystery-story clichés irked them the most. Here’s what they had to say:

**As soon as an officer arrests somebody, he immediately recites: “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney...”**

“Almost all of society believes when you’re arrested you have to have your Miranda rights read. In reality, no. The only time an officer has to read your Miranda rights is if you’re in custody and they interrogate you, ask questions. Most don’t want to ask questions because that makes them a witness, and they’re going to get subpoenaed for a case on their day off. They just want to make the arrest and move on.”

—Russell Maguire, former assistant attorney general for the state of Virginia.

**If any evidence is collected at a scene, you can swab it for DNA and catch the criminal by lunchtime.**

“Just because a murder weapon is there doesn’t mean we can necessarily get DNA on it; we might not even get fingerprints. People have this misconception that we can DNA anything. Well, you know what? Everything is *not* going to be a forensics case. Maybe it’s going to be a case where the detectives have to get out there and knock on some doors. That’s how most police work is solved.” —Susan Landin, crime scene technician with Newport News Police Department.

**A detective notices something on a dead body that everyone else missed, removes that item, and races off to solve the crime.**

“The most common errors I find in mystery fiction have to do with chain

of custody...When a body is at the scene, everything on that dead body goes with the body to the coroner's or medical examiner's office, and any property is documented and submitted into evidence by the technicians or the doctor at the autopsy. Removing it from the body is unthinkable; it would break the chain of custody and is a violation of state law. Even once at the coroner's office, the item cannot be removed from evidence without being signed for. Any expert that is consulted has to be approved by the department, must be qualified to give opinions in court, and will have to write a report on their findings and observations. The evidence won't be left with this expert for further testing without documentation of chain of custody, either. Otherwise, any crucial clues that the expert gives the investigator will be challenged in court as being unreliable and will invariably get thrown out by a judge." —*Dr. Judy Melinek, a forensic pathologist and co-author with writer T.J. Mitchell of Working Stiff: Two Years, 262 Bodies and the Making of a Medical Examiner.*

**An imprisoned character uses a file to escape from his cell.**

"In prison, the bars on cells are hollow and they are filled with oil. And inside the oil is a free-floating, solid-steel rod. That way, if you saw through the first bar, the oil will lubricate the second one, and it will spin so you can't see through it." —*Dawn West, retired Newport News sheriff's deputy.*

**GO-suited G-men leap-frog around the country on private jets to chase down a criminal.**

"It's kind of funny the way so many stories show agents climbing on the bureau plane. If we do fly somewhere, we fly commercial! I'm probably one of the only agents who has ever been on the agency plane, and that was because I had to fly down to Gitmo to do an

interrogation." —*Retired FBI Special Agent David Coes.*

**CIA spooks nab someone off Main Street and whisk him off for interrogation.**

"One of the things a lot of [spy novelists] get wrong is showing the CIA operating on United States soil. We have very strong laws in this country to prevent the CIA and other intelligence agencies from spying on Americans, so you don't have CIA officers running around on the streets of America. You can go to jail for it." —*Mark Henshaw, a former analyst with the CIA's "Red Cell" think tank.*

**A villain points his pistol menacingly in someone's direction. Then, to make his point more dramatic, he cocks it.**

"The one most often seen in movies is the guy cocking the hammer on a single-action automatic, such as the 1911 military .45. That type of semi-automatic pistol is cocked when the slide is pulled back to chamber a round and normally stays cocked until fired. So cocking it manually before the slide is operated would be cocking the weapon on an empty chamber." —*Bill Walsh,*

*two-time director of the National Practical Pistol Championships.*

**...Then everything exploded in a flash.**

"Hollywood makes two big mistakes when it comes to explosives. First, not every detonation produces a red ball of fire. It's actually hard to get that effect; you have to add just the right amount of diesel fuel. Secondly, and more importantly for a writer, the bomb technician who disarms the device is usually misunderstood. We are often portrayed as reckless cowboys or nutty cranks. Remember Crazy Harry from the *Muppet Show*? In reality, though, working with explosives never gets blasé, and you'll rarely meet more careful and safety-conscious professionals." —*Brian Castner, former commander of an Army Explosive Ordinance Disposal unit.* **W**

**Bill Glose**, a former paratrooper and combat platoon leader, serves now as the books editor at *Virginia Living*. Whenever possible, he undertakes intriguing pursuits – such as walking across Virginia and participating in a world-record-setting skinny dip – to write about for magazines. His website ([BillGlose.com](http://BillGlose.com)) includes a page of helpful information for writers.

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