

Spotlight on: Hank Phillippi Ryan

July 2017

Biography



Hank Phillippi Ryan's been in our living rooms since 1983—you know her as the on-air investigative reporter for Boston's [7News](#). She's won a record-breaking 34 Emmys (wow) and dozens more honors for her ground-breaking journalism. But what readers may not know—she's not only the bestselling author of nine mysteries, but also an award-winner in that second profession—with five Agathas, two Anthonys, two Macavitys, the Daphne, and for [The Other Woman](#), the coveted Mary Higgins Clark Award. Her novels have been named *Library Journal's* Best of 2014 and 2015—and Ryan's newest novel, [Say No More](#), is a *Library Journal* Best of 2016. It is now also honored as a Mary Higgins Clark, Agatha, and Daphne Award nominee. Hank is a founder of MWA University and 2013 president of [National Sisters in Crime](#). And—breaking news! She just sent the manuscript of a brand new novel to her editor.

[Find Hank's work at the Sharon Public Library!](#)

Interview

1. In regard to your work as an investigative reporter for the local news station, what is the most interesting story you've covered?

Impossible to say! I've wired myself with hidden cameras, confronted corrupt politicians, gone undercover and in disguise. New laws have been passed as a result of our stories, people have been sent to prison, I've had people confess to murder, we've gotten people's homes out of foreclosure, and millions of dollars in refunds and restitution for consumers. So—it's been incredibly rewarding and fulfilling—but the stories I could tell from over the past forty years would take up all the room you have! What's my best story? It's the one that's around the next corner.

2. That sounds incredibly exciting. How do you think your investigative work has impacted your fiction, if at all?

Well, it *is* exciting. I am incredibly lucky to have spent the past forty years doing research! Each of my books is completely informed by my investigative work. The novels are not my stories turned into fiction, but they are—because this is my passion—timely and informative and exciting, as well as being a true inside look into worlds that readers might never have known about. Yes, my complete goal is to entertain you—I hope you'll

miss your stop on the T because you are so immersed in the book!—but I also want my thrillers to be... important.

And you know crime fiction and investigative reporting have incredible parallels—a great story, with characters you care about, a big problem that needs to be solved. You're tracking down clues and following leads, and in the end, you want justice, and to change the world a bit. That's my goal in both my careers.

3. Your list of awards is impressive, to say the least. (Congratulations on *Say No More's* recent honors!) What is it like to have racked up so many different accolades over time? Has it changed your experience of being a writer in any way?

Yes, thank you! So thrilled about [Say No More](#) and the crazy-wonderful success of all the books. Because fiction is a new addition to my resume, it's terrific to have had such recognition. Has it changed my experience as a writer? Well, I've been writing for TV for forty years, right? And I've learned it's all about making a jewel of a story every time—a unique, fascinating, riveting, important, captivating story. So that's what I do in fiction, as well.

I am thrilled, over-the-top thrilled about the awards—because writing is so solitary, and it's so intensely terrifying to think of someone actually reading the book. And spectacular when people love it! So my theory of writing is to do the very best I can, every second of every day. And if the awards come, hurray.

4. You mention that fiction is a “new addition” to your resume. What first inspired you to move into the realm of fiction writing? Are you happy you made the shift, or do you prefer non-fiction or journalistic work?

I remember the moment exactly, in fact. Since I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to be a crime fiction author or a detective. And now—I'm both, right? But I never had a good idea for a plot. Then one day at Channel 7—long story which I'll tell when I come visit the library—I simply had a great idea. I was compelled. Obsessed. Inspired. I powered home and said to my husband—I'm going to write the mystery I've always wanted to write! And that became [Prime Time](#), my first novel, which won the Agatha for Best First Mystery. (I was 55 years old, by the way, so it's never too late.)

Which do I prefer? Impossible, and happily, I don't have to choose. So that's why I call it an “addition.” How great is that? And I am happier than I have ever been.

5. What was it about crime fiction and detective work that originally drew you in?

That is a terrific question. I wish I remembered the first crime fiction book I read. I bet it was [Nancy Drew](#), though. Or [Trixie Belden](#). Scouring my memory, I loved that Nancy—and soon after, [Sherlock Holmes](#) and [Miss Marple](#) and [Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane](#) and [Inspector Alan Grant](#)—would find themselves in a difficult situation, with a critical problem that needed to be solved, and could use their wits and intelligence and skill to not only solve that crime but to save the day. I wonder if as a little kid I loved the idea of trying to make the world more just and fair, and have the good guys always win. Plus, I loved trying to figure out the solution to the crime before the sleuth revealed it! I

loved the puzzle elements of the story—and the idea that a wonderful author could weave a marvelous suspenseful and surprising story.

6. The cover art on each of your books is very striking; can you talk about that process a little bit? How involved were you in the creation of the art?

It's so exciting! But, gosh, I leave that to the experts. Forge Books has an amazing staff of artists. My editor and I tell them what the book is about and how we see it placed and who it will appeal to. And they come up with a few ideas and send them to us. Usually there's one that's so out-of-the-ballpark fabulous that it's a clear winner. There's always that goosebump moment when I get the email with a jpeg, and the subject line: Your Cover! And I know in the next click, I will see my future!

7. Who else is on your team, so to speak, as you write, edit, and publish a novel? How did you first find your agent, editor, and so on?

Oh, the long and winding road. I was such a newbie when I started, I didn't realize how complicated (and risky) it is to write a book and have it published by a major publisher. One quick example. When I got my agent (which is another long story, done by cold call submissions and a lot of crossed fingers), she told me that in the year she and I decided to work together, she got twenty-thousand submissions. And took on six of them as clients. Six out of twenty-thousand. Yikes.

The agent (who handles the business part of the book) offered my books to the editors at various publishing houses—and my editor is one who fell in love with the books and offered to publish them.

My agent and my editor serve also as my counselors, therapists, teachers, guides, and mentors.

The team? Oh, you can't believe it! Publisher, agent, editor, copy editor, artists, graphic designers, publicist, social media designer, web designer, sales staff, librarians—I can't even list them all. Each one a joy and a true professional. And you are so right, it is truly a team.

And I have so many wonderful author friends. And of course, readers. Readers are the key to the entire thing! I'm not sure readers know how important they are to an author's career. Pivotal. Tell a friend you love a book. Review it. Spread the word. Take it out of the library. Buy it! Tell the author. Come to author events. It is so important, I can't begin to tell you.

8. It sounds like breaking into the world of publishing can be pretty overwhelming. Do you have any advice for newcomers who are trying to attract an editor or agent's attention? Did you ever consider self-publishing?

Advice? Yes, I have advice. Write the best book you can possibly write. Then work on it and work on it and work on it. Every author/manuscript combination is different, with its own pluses and minuses, but the thing that brings a book to the top is quality. I insist that's true! And it's much more difficult than a new author can imagine at the outset. Sometimes "connections" will help get someone to read it—although nothing like that

happened for me—but the hard solid truth is that writing a terrific book is how to attract the publishing world's attention.

Self-publishing? No, not for me. It's difficult enough being an author without having to deal with layout, distribution, advertising, sales, promotion, type setting, proofreading, editing... and on and on.

9. Of your own work, do you have a favorite? If so, why that one?

My favorite? Impossible! Each book is the best it can possibly be for the writer I was at that time. (There are things I adore about every book that I've written, if I may be so bold as to say so.) I do think I'm continuing to get better and better, and for that I am grateful. So right now, *Say No More* is my favorite, because it's the current book, and I am eager for everyone to read it! (Let me know how you like it, okay?)

But breaking news: I just sent in my new manuscript to the publisher, and I am floating with delight about it. And now... mulling over my next idea. Very exciting!

Hank Phillippi Ryan's Summer of Excellent Reading: Book Recommendations

I am having a great summer of reading! I just powered through the marvelous [Magpie Murders](#) by Anthony Horowitz—such a treat for those who love Agatha Christie. Highly recommended! Loved [Every Last Lie](#), the psychological thriller by the amazing Mary Kubica. I am eagerly awaiting the new ones by [Gilly MacMillan](#), [Shari Lapena](#), and [Fiona Barton](#)—my faves. My dear pal Hallie Ephron's newest novel of suspense [You'll Never Know, Dear](#) is terrific. I am watching for the always-wonderful Linda Fairstein's [Deadfall](#), coming soon. Oh—Meg Gardiner's [Unsub](#)—her fictional riff on the Zodiac killings. If you haven't read Meg, she is amazing, and this is a great place to start. Spencer Quinn's [The Right Side](#) is so touching, and a must read. Love him.

I know I'm leaving something out—but you tell me! Email me via my website hankphillipryan.com, click on Contact—and tell me what *you're* reading!