

## Jeffery Deaver: Master of Craft

By Fleur Bradley

This year's PPW Conference keynote speaker Jeffery Deaver is the kind of author all of us aspire to be. With over 25 books published, praise from Booklist and Publishers Weekly for his intricate plots, strong dialogue, and clever plot-twists, and a number of awards, it's hard to imagine Deaver was ever a beginner.

But during his humorous keynote speech, he reminded us that every writer has to start at the bottom—and Deaver took us through all those recognizable bottom moments.

In a self-deprecating reading of diary entries, he talked about finding rejection letters in the mail, about bad reviews, unhappy fan mail, and procrastinating by mowing the lawn rather than writing a dreaded scene. "I'm a lazy writer," he said.

That "lazy" writer maintains both his Lincoln Rhyme and Kathryn Dance series, while writing stand-alone novels and short stories on the side. "I'm a businessman," he said simply about his productivity. He added that he enjoys writing very much, but treats his work as any professional would. "If a pilot wakes up in a bad mood, he still has to fly the plane."

Deaver is a methodical writer, who takes his plotting seriously. "I research for about eight months." This process has led to his reputation as an intricate writer. "Get it right," he advised writers about researching. His outlines are more than 100 pages long before he sits down in a dark room and writes for two months straight. "I write very quickly, to get the ideas down. In the darkness, I can picture the images in the book." And when he writes, he is only focused on one person: his reader.

To a packed conference room, he explained this fierce dedication to his reader. "A novel is a consumer product," he said in his opening, comparing novels to products like toothpaste. "You have to give your reader something they want, or need." He continued by saying plot should come first, and then character. "Everything else is secondary."

Deaver explained important components to plot, like creating a puzzle for readers to solve, maintaining suspense for as long as possible, and resolving every single conflict in the story. About the use of graphic violence in fiction, he said simply, "Suspense is good, gore is bad. It's easy to write a gory scene, but it's hard to write suspense."

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He continued, explaining the importance of characters. "The characters have to be living, breathing people, otherwise the plot is useless." Deaver said characters should act, be multi-dimensional, and speak realistically. "Observe, observe, observe," he said, after an anecdote of listening in on a group of inner-city teens, to watch how they behaved around each other and get their speech patterns right.

"We have to like our protagonist," Deaver said about series characters. "Be very careful about killing characters off," adding that it could disappoint readers. Although believing in the importance of character, Deaver emphasized putting plot first—an unusual stance for a fiction writer to take. "Never let your characters control the story," he said, then added with humility: "I could be wrong, but I know where my story goes."

Deaver takes a systematic approach to plotting and structuring his novels, but this does not mean he has no appreciation for the art of writing. "The prose, the writing, is hard enough," he explains to a table of fans over lunch. "Why make it harder?" Even with

his intricate work plotting, Deaver rewrites his manuscripts 40 to 50 times before sending to his publisher. “Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite,” he advised attendees during his conference session.

For his short stories, Deaver creates outlines as well. “But with short stories, there’s only one purpose: that big jolt.” For his novels, he aims to keep his readers emotionally engaged, but for short stories, “It’s all about the shock.” And his approach has been successful: he won the Ellery Queen Reader award for best short story several times. “I have a small following,” he said.

The awards, the good reviews—all this success could really feed an author’s ego. But Jeffery Deaver stays humble, and focused on his readers. “Readers are smart,” he said, adding that he reads all reviews of his work. During PPW Conference, he talked to writers and fans, remaining friendly, accessible and honest. His keynote speech praised the conference for its friendly atmosphere and camaraderie among writers. And Deaver talked about eating kiwis and drinking lattes at Hollywood meetings, not afraid to make light of his own success, and sharing his setbacks. “They’re speed bumps, not brick walls,” he said of a fiction writer’s challenges, reminding the audience to take the good with the bad, like he does. “Writing is a journey, not a destination.”

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