

Q & A

with Author Tom Rhyne

Granite Elephants: A High-Tech Murder Mystery

Q. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to writing fiction? When did you first know you wanted to write a novel?

A. I published an award-winning textbook on computer design in 1973. I enjoyed writing it, so I decided to try my hand at writing the kind of fiction that I enjoyed reading—books with fairly complex plots and lots of interesting characters. I have written two so far. I submitted an excerpt from *Granite Elephants* to the Writers Guild in Austin a couple of years ago, and it won an award for mystery fiction. That kept me writing, but I have found writing fiction to be much harder than writing my textbook.

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Q. How did you become interested in the mystery genre? Who are some of your influences in this genre, or in fiction generally?

A. I'm a fan of Lee Child's many Jack Reacher stories and have tried to write about a strong male character like Child does.

However, I like female leads as well, such as Jennifer Chase’s Katie Scott. I don’t really think of GE as a “mystery,” though. I see it as a story filled with yet-to-be unveiled aspects of the overall story, things that I hope will keep the reader interested in finding out what happens next.

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Q. Jury has a lot of the characteristics we associate with old-school hardboiled detectives like Sam Spade or Philip Marlow but placed in a modern setting. He’s something of a man out of time, struggling with technology and his place in the world after the tragic loss of his wife. Can you talk a little bit about your inspiration for Jury as a character?

A. Frankly, much of Jury comes from myself and my physical characteristics (I, too, used to be a runner), but I’m thirty+ years older than he is. I see him as competent in the things he can do himself, plus being supported by specialists in the “modern” areas where he’s out of his depth—see Friar Tuck, Imogene, and R. J. As to Lauren, I lost my wife of 57 years a few years ago, and I channeled some of that angst into Jury’s story.

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Q. What inspired you to write a high-tech mystery? Especially given Jury’s reluctance to engage with technology, it’s such an interesting choice to drop him in the middle of this world he doesn’t understand.

A. As I mentioned, I am a computer jock, so populating Jury’s story with advanced technologies came naturally. I did some background research on currency arbitrage to have an area to apply the technology, and it seemed like a good fit. I managed the AI group at a research company for several years (the

Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation, better known as MCC), so I knew a lot about that subject when I started.

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Q. What did your research process look like? Can you talk a little about the ways you incorporate research and technical knowledge into your fiction?

A. I'm fairly skilled at doing Internet searches, so I did a lot of those, especially with regard to international banking and currency exchange. I actually toned down some of the technology, based on the wonderful editing by Aaron Teel, but overall, I think having Jury as kind of an everyman faced with new things that he has to learn about was—hopefully—a nice hook for my story. As a former computer engineering professor, I also embedded a little “teaching” into the story.

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Q. The Austin setting plays a big role in the novel as well. What's your history and relationship with the city?

A. I have lived in Austin for over 40 years. I was on the Westlake school board for a decade, so I tossed in a scene at Westlake Stadium. I like the County Line restaurant, so it, too, got tossed in. I know the hills of West Austin, as well, plus I drive on Mopac almost every day. I also added scenes involving the Tarrytown Library. I am a member of the Citizens Police Academy, and that led to writing about the APD with a little of an “insider's” view. As I hope my story shows, I have been involved in many different aspects of the city, and I have drawn on those experiences.

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Q. Is this the first novel you've written, or do you have several more stuffed in a drawer somewhere?

A. I have written one other novel and have started on a prequel to *Granite Elephants* that tells of Jury's time on the Galveston police department, plus details about the why and how of Lauren's murder. I grew up near Galveston and heard all the mafia stories. That is a key aspect of my prequel. The working title is *Island Aflame*. It will explain why Lauren was murdered in front of a classroom filled with elementary students, and what Jury did in retaliation that made him persona non grata with the Galveston PD.

The other novel is named *Canaries*. It's available for \$1 on Amazon if you want to glance at it. Its characters are based on my son and one of his Westlake High friends. Despite being an all-state football player, my son went to MIT, and I drew on those experiences. It, too, has some high-tech aspects, plus roping in some North Korean bad guys.

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Q. How long did it take you to write this novel? Can you talk a little bit about your process? For example, do you work from an outline? Do you write every day? Do you have any rituals or writing habit that keep you motivated?

A. I started on *GE* about 8 years ago. It took a year to complete the first manuscript. Back then I usually wrote in the late evenings a few nights a week. I don't outline other than having an evolving table of contents. I find that I can really focus on writing for a fairly long time when I have story ideas percolating in my head. I've been that way all my life.

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Q. What's next? Do you have any other projects currently in the works that you can talk about?

A. What I do next depends on what happens with *Granite Elephants*. If the book sells and I get a movie contract, who knows? If not, I'll probably stop writing detective/mystery fiction, at least for a while. I may turn to science-fiction and write yet another story about an AI system that goes wild. I am getting married to a high school classmate in November, and we both like to travel, so I may be putting writing to the side temporarily anyway!