Legend:

* Steven James
* John Gilstrap

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Hello, everyone, and welcome to The Story Blender! I’m Steven James and this is where great storytellers share the secrets of great storytelling.

My guest today is the prolific author of the popular Jonathan Grave thriller series. John Gilstrap is the *New York Times* bestselling novelist of many books including *Scorpion Strike, Final Target, Friendly Fire, Nathan’s Run, At All Costs,* and *Six Minutes to Freedom.* In addition, John has written four screenplays for Hollywood, adapting the works of Nelson DeMille, Norman Maclean, and Thomas Harris. He is contracted to write and co-produce the film adaptation of his book *Six Minutes to Freedom.*

In his latest thriller, *Total Mayhem,* coming out at the end of June, freelance operative Jonathan Grave penetrates a terrorist cell to stop the detonation of “Total Mayhem” on home ground.

A frequent speaker at literary events, John also teaches seminars on suspense writing techniques at a wide variety of venues from local libraries to the Smithsonian Institution. Outside of his writing life, John is a renowned safety expert with extensive knowledge of explosives, hazardous materials, and fire behavior. John lives in Fairfax, Virginia.

John, thanks so much! I’m thrilled to have you on the show today.

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I’m thrilled to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

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Yeah, no. I’ve been hoping to have you on for a while, ever since I spent some time up there in DC. You actually gave a kind offer to let us stay at your house while we toured about the city working on research for my next novel.

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Well, I hope it was comfortable.

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Yeah, it was. It was fantastic. So while I was up there, I think you’d mentioned that you worked in a variety of other jobs. I think as a paramedic. Didn’t you work as a paramedic?

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I was an EMT.

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Yeah. EMT.

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I never really got the certification for paramedic. I was a firefighter and EMT for about fifteen years.

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Yeah, I thought so. And I wondered: did that ever give you any fodder for some of the story ideas for your novels?

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I’m not sure it gives me fodder for the ideas themselves, but certainly the emotions and the things you witness and the fear you feel, and… that certainly fuels a lot of the drama of the story. It’s easy to recall some of that stuff. You’ve just got to repackage it into the emotions of the thrillers I write.

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Yeah, no kidding. I talked to one firefighter one time and he had said that he had found a body under a bed and it was the same age of the daughter that he had at home and he could never forget that and he could never… he had a hard time getting past that.

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There’s always the incident I think that kind of breaks everybody. You have to have kind of a heart of steel to get through a lot of the stuff, particularly on the EMS side.

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Yeah.

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You know, you’re being called… I didn’t get philosophical about this until I got much older—at the time, I was just running calls—but you think about it, I was 23, 24 years old and being summoned into the worst moments of people’s lives and taking charge of it and being responsible for it. At the time, it was what I did, it was a rush, but then every now and there would be that thing that breaks through the shell and just gets to you. But I think that’s part of being human, because if you didn’t have those moments, if you never let it in, I think bad things might happen.

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No kidding. That’s powerful. And I bet you that the emotions—like what you mentioned earlier—the emotions with those harsh experiences of being there through the life-or-death situations really do give an authenticity to those types of situations in the books that you write.

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I will say that there was one—and I won’t go into details—but within one twenty-four-hour period, I held a child while he died and then I delivered a new baby on a different call about twelve hours later.

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Oh my goodness.

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You know, that’s kind of… that’s the whole gamut of emotions all in one day, and that’s only half the shit.

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Wow. That’s crazy. And tell me a little bit about… you’ve done some research, I think, on arson investigation and fire investigations?

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Well, I was actually… research is too strong of a word. As a fire officer, I worked through certification skills you have to go through—I was a lieutenant at the end—in order to go through certain levels for officer and instructor, you have to take courses on different things and it wasn’t so much fire investigation as it was recognizing arson for what it was. And then you call in the fire marshal to do the real investigation.

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Yeah, wow. I know in the last five or six years, I’ve read several accounts of how someone was freed from prison because recent arson investigation techniques had realized that the fire they were in prison for was actually not arson after all.

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Oh, wow.

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Yeah, it’s crazy. But the techniques for understanding arson and fire investigation have just progressed so much, apparently, over the last couple of decades that they can look back and—

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In my experience, there are relatively few arson fires that I ran into. There were maybe ten, fifteen of them. And they were all done… it’s like burglaries. They were all done by stupid people. In two of them, we had to take the arsonist to the hospital because he burned himself in the process of setting the fire. So some were solved more easily than others. But mostly it’s just people that… they’re firebugs. They like to set a fire and watch them burn.

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Now, I also know from personal experience that you are a gun connoisseur.

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I do enjoy things that go boom, yes.

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So, tell us a little bit about… have you ever gotten anything wrong in a book relating to a gun? Because I have. I can raise my hand. I’ve gotten something wrong.

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Yes, I have, and what’s really nice about having a large fanbase is that all of them are willing to write to you and tell you that you got the detail wrong.

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Let you know that you made a mistake, yeah.

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But that was really early on, in the early books. Since I’ve been writing the Grave books, I don’t think I’ve gotten a major weapons thing wrong. I shouldn’t throw that out there because that’s going to trigger a lot of emails. But to my knowledge, I’m pretty accurate on it.

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Yeah, no, that’s great. I was talking with someone and he had consulted with a SWAT team member about one of the questions he had relating to a gun, and then someone else wrote back to him and said, “I can’t believe that you put this in there with this gun, that’s such a stupid mistake,” and he was like, “Well I consulted with the SWAT team guys to make sure that it was right!” So I wonder if some of it is just personal perspective on some stuff.

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Well, I call— there are levels of ‘gun porn.’

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Gun porn.

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I mean, there are folks that really get into weeds on this stuff, and I’ve gotten some challenging emails from people. Jonathan Graves’ favorite sidearm is a Colt 1911 chambered .45. I mean, it’s like an old WWII 1911 .45. And it happens to be his favorite gun. It’s his favorite gun because that’s what I started it at. It’s not my favorite gun. And I’ll hear from people that say, “Well, he should be smarter than that, he should be carrying a this or a that,” and it’s like, “Make up your own character, okay? This is mine, and this is what he carries.”

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Yeah, that’s funny. I was thinking of just the gun that my character carries in the Patrick Bowers novels, and it’s a Sig. And my dad actually gave me a Sig and he’s like, ‘I want you to have the same gun that your character carries around.’ So I thought that was pretty cool. My dad was kind of a gun nut himself and it was pretty neat that he was interested in giving me the same kind of weapon that my character carried around.

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I like Sigs. I just can’t afford them. It’s a very expensive firearm.

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Yeah, I only have one, but I do have one now. So that was pretty cool. So, for today, in today’s world, for a story to sell, it really needs to be firing on all cylinders. There’s so much competition out there and so many people selling books: to you, what are some of the secrets of a great action thriller?

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I think the secrets of an action thriller are the same secrets to a romance or an adventure story. It’s interesting characters doing interesting things in interesting ways. What separates a thriller out from the others, obviously, is the stakes—you know, what happens if the hero fails—and the pacing. The heartbeat of the story. It’s got to have a real internal pull that keeps readers going from scene to scene. But ultimately, if the characters are flat or if the characters are not doing interesting things in interesting ways, it really doesn’t matter what the plot is about. It just, it’s not going to work. I participate… there’s a group, there’s an event called ThrillerFest that happens every summer, and it is exactly what it sounds like. International Thriller Writers. So it’s kind of like the industry meeting for thriller writers. And they throw out an event called PitchFest, which is… new authors get to pitch their ideas to agents to try to get representation. I can’t imagine doing it. It’s just punishing. But to help them prepare, I do a thing called ‘Practice PitchFest,’ where I kind of help them hone their pitches. And I’m always shocked—I sit down with these folks, they’re talking about their baby, and say, ‘My book is about the economic meltdown following a Chinese blah bla blah.’ And I keep telling them, ‘No! That’s not what your book is about! Your book is about how people deal with the economic whatever-is-the-plot.’ Always start with the characters. That’s what drives a story. Character.

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That was a question, too, that I was going to ask you a little bit later, but it’s good to bring it up now. So, when you think of character development, some people look at a thriller and say, ‘Oh, it’s a plot-driven story.’ Or they look at a literary novel or a coming-of-age story and say, ‘Oh, that’s a character-driven story.’ But here you write commercially-viable action thrillers and you’re saying character is the key to great storytelling.

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Yes. Absolutely. In the case of Jonathan Graves, my character’s a freelance hostage rescue specialist and he’s the star—arguably the hero—of each of the books. But the other side of what he does is who is he rescuing? Who are the people he’s rescuing? What is their plight? And that really is where most of the story lies. In how are the soon-to-be-rescued people or the victims or whatever the case may be, how are they coping with the ordeal that they are enduring? And if we can now feel sorry for… not even feel sorry, that’s the wrong word. If we can empathize with people who are going through very understandable crises, their lives are in danger and being held captive, whatever the case may be, we want them to succeed, we want them to be rescued, and we want Jonathan to be able to overcome what he needs to overcome to do what he does. And the series character has developed over about twelve books, hard as that is to believe, and he develops, too. He has his foibles and he has his moral compass that he tries never to violate. So ultimately, the plot itself is the clothes on the skeleton. The skeleton is the character and the plot itself is just what compels the characters to do what they’re doing. Does that make sense? I feel like I kind of just went in a circle.

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Yeah, no. It’s interesting because sometimes in my classes when I teach on writing, I’ll say, ‘There’s really no such thing as a character- or plot-driven story.’ And everyone says, ‘What are you talking about?’ because that’s the paradigm that everyone talks about. But every story is a tension-driven story. And sometimes that’s internal or external or interpersonal tension. I hear you saying a similar thing, just in a different way, that your stories, you have this tension that’s inherent in the story, with your character and also the victims that he’s trying to rescue and save. And as you develop your character, you explore that and people care about, empathize with, care about what’s happening, and they want a satisfactory outcome at the end of the story.

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Yeah, I think it’s a mistake… you hear this all the time that—apparently just do things my way, everything would make sense—a lot of instructors talk about storytelling as plot, character, and setting, and these various elements as if they are separate things. and they’re not. The setting is the place where the character drives the plot, and the narrative voice is the voice of whoever owns the scene at that time. Everything, as you describe character… excuse me, as you describe the setting, you’re using vocabulary that also develops the character, right? And then the character drives the plot, so now we know his squint on what he’s got to do. It’s just a big knot as opposed to categories.

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Yeah, it is interesting that people do try to separate and define instead of looking at the big picture, which is, ‘Does this story work, is it moving the readers, is it impacting them,’ and I think it’s like so many things, like the sum is greater than… how does that go?

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The sum is greater than the parts?

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The parts, yeah.

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The sum of the parts is great than the whole? Something like that.

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The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Yeah, exactly. There it is. But you can have a really interesting character and really interesting setting, but if they’re not pursuing something in an intriguing way, all you have is just a description of a guy in Tahiti, you know. Wherever he might be. Yeah, interesting. So I think we were talking one time, John, you mentioned something about your characters in your stories. It’s almost like they sidle up to the bar and you tell them, ‘Here, I want you to go do this and this and this.’ Some authors have a much more organic approach where they kind of try to listen to the characters and try to develop or shape the story around that. Does your story—or your approach, I should say—require an outline? Or how do you approach that with the characters, kind of directing them what to do?

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Wow. As far as outlines are concerned, I know the beginning, the middle, and the end before I start. By the end, the good guys win, for the most part.

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Yay.

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Not necessarily without pain, but you write a series and certain outcomes are a given, but in terms… I call that the woo-woo of writing. All of the finger-symbol-y, your-characters-come-and-talk-to-you and all that. That’s just never happened to me. And I think I said to you was that my characters sit at the bar and say, ‘Hey, Mr. Writer Man, what do you want me to do today?’

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Yeah, exactly.

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For me, a book is—I don’t mean this in a negative way at all, in fact I’m a former engineer so I look at this as a good thing—that a book is an engineered product. The story has to go from here to there, and at each step along the way it has to be compelling and exciting. And because I write in the thriller genre, there’s really not a lot of time for wistful examination and smelling of the plants along the way. They’re trying to do what they’re going to do. So that’s kind of what drives the plot, because I’m, and to be honest with you this happens almost every book because I don’t outline, I find myself kind of written into a corner because I have at least one book a year I’ve got to write. I don’t have the luxury of going back and re-engineering from the beginning, so a lot of times, it’s, ‘Okay, let’s have a great pretend. This is where you put them there, now how are you going to get them out?’ and for me, that’s some of the thrill of the storytelling. It’s just like when we were kids and… when I was little we would go out and play guns and stuff, play Army and cowboys and Indians. My neighborhood, it never had a Nazi and it never had a swarm of Indians come in the entire time I was there because my buddies and I kept them out, but I was always the plot guy. ‘This is what we’re doing, come on guys.’ There was a lot of shooting and dying and all of that, but what the mission was was always mine. So now, when I write these stories, it’s kind of the same thing. You go and get sweaty.

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Sounds like it is kind of the same thing. You’re still the guy plotting it out and you’re still taking out the bad guys.

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Right.

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That’s good. Glad you’re on our side. I appreciate what you said about writing yourself into a corner because at different events and conferences, seminars and stuff, very often well-meaning instructors will warn you against that. They’ll say, ‘Oh, you don’t want to write yourself into a corner,’ or, ‘You need an outline or else you’ll write yourself into a corner,’ and for me personally, those corners, that’s where the best ideas always seem to come to me. Like when you said a minute ago: ‘Here we are, now we’ve got to find our way out of this.’ So I always think it’s strange that we warn people against going to the place where sometimes the best ideas await.

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Well, yeah, but isn’t that part of being a journeyman professional at what you’re doing? I think a lot of it is having a conscience. I’m here, I got here, I’ve done it before, I can get out. When you’re teaching rookies, I get the impulse, I understand the impulse to try to lessen their frustration. But I think you’re right: it’s in the frustration is where the cool stuff lies. And it’s weird, I don’t know if you agree with this or not, but after more than a couple books, that solution, the thing you need to get out of the corner, is almost always already in the plot.

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It’s embedded in there, yeah.

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It’s already organic to what you’ve done. It’s like you anticipated what was going to happen.

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How does that work? I know. Your mind is ahead of itself. I think the subconscious does play a role in all this. As we develop it, then there’s threads of meaning in stories and as you really sit there and examine, say ‘I’ve got to get out of this corner, I’ve got to get out of this situation, this problem,’ you look back at what you’ve written and very often, there are clues to how you can solve it in a believable but unexpected way.

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You know, I’ve never been comfortable calling myself an artist and thinking of what I do. I write commercial fiction, I write good commercial fiction, but I get uncomfortable thinking of it as art. Now, having said that, I think about other artists, whether it’s painting or dancing or singing or sculpture or whatever the case may be, the talent, the art part, is that unique squint on the world that they have in the things they’re presenting. If I could paint, which I can’t, my landscape that I paint would be different than your landscape even if we’re looking at the same thing because we look at things differently. And I think that it’s that interpretation and the ability to form images out of words and make them work, that’s the artistry part. And then crafting it all together is the craft. But without that particular image, that viewpoint, the craft won’t matter. And in there lies what we were talking about with the subconscious working. I do think that the people who love to write—people who love to create anything—there’s always something working in the background to drive forward.

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And I don’t know how it actually works. I don’t exactly know how to harness it. But I do know that it’s part of the process. It’s there and I think if people discount it entirely, it’s probably not the wisest idea, but sometimes people just want to root around in the subconscious and I don’t know that that’s really… I don’t have the time for that a lot of times either.

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Well, it’s one of those things that you have… I think it’s a mistake, I know it’s a mistake for me. I don’t mean to presume for others. I don’t want to know how it works. I think if I think too hard about it, it’s like trying to— have you ever done that moment where you’re in bed and you say, ‘I want to capture that moment where I fall asleep,’ so at three in the morning you’re still awake because you’re trying to find a moment where you fall asleep? I’m afraid if you think too hard about creativity and try to undo the code, to break the code, then the code will go away.

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When you were saying that, I was thinking of tying my shoes and how I do it without thinking, and sometimes I sit there and I say, ‘Okay, I need to think about,’ I can’t tie my shoe.

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Try spitting out the gum. Maybe that will help.

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Yeah, no kidding. I know. Well, that’s fascinating, and I love how for you, you kind of said you know the beginning, the middle, and the end, and yet you also try to be really responsive to the story as you write it. Seems like it is organic, but it’s not writing, like some people say, “by the seat of your pants” or whatever, because you have direction of where you’re heading.

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Yeah, I have direction and you polish all along the way. For me, it helps… I start every day by re-writing what I wrote the day before, so that by the time I get to the end of the book, I’ve pretty much got a finished manuscript. And along the way, you realize, actually, that this isn’t going to work. You write this chapter and then you read it again and think, ‘Oops, two chapters from now I change that,’ so then you go back again and finish it, or change it. I often think about what we do. I had this discussion with a buddy of mine, that I’ve never been an actor, but inside the actors’ studio I like talking with actors, and they talk about the “method,” where you take life experiences and you somehow, when you’re acting, you bring your life experiences to your character and then somehow project out the- bring the character to life. I think there’s a lot of that in what we do. It’s just a matter of taking something— We started out this conversation talking about the fire and rescue stuff. Well, if you’ve really been scared, or shot at, or stabbed at, or… I’ve done all of those, it doesn’t matter the context, the “holy crap fear” is the same, right? At least, I presume it is and that’s how I project it out to the characters.

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Yeah, that’s… the “holy crap fear,” I was thinking of a time when I went rock climbing once, and when you lead climb you have to kind of climb above your protection and then put new protection in, or you clip into bolts that are maybe in the rock. There was this one time when I was lead climbing and I just could not find a spot to put some protection in, so I had to keep going higher and higher to do it, and finally I looked back and realized it was like thirty feet to my last protection, so I was like, “Holy crap,” just like what you just said. “If I fall, I’m not just going thirty feet down to that piece, but then all the slack in the rope, I’ll go like fifty, sixty feet. I do not want to fall right now!” It was the scariest—

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Kidneys through your nose.

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Yeah, it was for me one of the scariest moments. But when I’m writing, it’s a moment that I can tap into, and I think that those moments of extreme emotion are ones that very often readers can really relate to. Do you find that readers, when they write to you, have certain moments in the books where they say, “This was super powerful to me,” or “I could really identify with your character here”?

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Yes. And they all have to do with character and emotion.

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Interesting.

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Nobody ever writes about the big setup piece. You know, “I love the way you blew up this thing.” The action that drives thrillers is the tiny moments that resonate with people and that take them to a place that resonates with their past. Like some people will cry at some movies and some people will have an emotional reaction to a work of art. It’s not the absolute value of the work of art, it’s the resonance that it brings to the observer. I’ve often said that writing is not about the writer. It’s never about the writer. I want to be invisible in writing. Writing is about the reader and making sure the reader gets the best ride and the best experience that I can give to them.

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Yeah, absolutely. Sometimes I’ll read books and some people call it author intrusion or, I mean, there’s different terms, but you’ll be reading it and he’ll insert his political view or his religious view or his research on foreign fauna of North Carolina or something, and it’s like, ‘Oh. Where did the story go? All I’m noticing right now is the author.’ And I love how you said it’s really about the reader. It’s not about showing off your research or your writing or anything, it’s about getting out of the way.

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Right. And I have a… actually, you probably know him, too. This author buddy of mine was doing some research in a book. A character got buried alive. So this guy wanted to do the research on what it felt like to be buried alive so he went around to funeral homes and finally found a funeral director that would allow him to get locked into a casket so that he could experience what it was like. So I said, “Alright, so what did you find out?” He said, “Well, it was dark, it was hot, and it got hard to breathe.” I said, “What of that could you not have imagined? Without going through the whole thing as maybe a practical joke, people don’t let you out of the casket.”

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“It was hot, and it was hard to breathe, and it was dark.” Well, that’s… Some people will say to me sometimes, “How did you write a character who was a villain,” or, “To climb inside the mind of someone else,” or, “How did you write this teenaged girl’s part,” and I know how I approach it. How do you, John, when you’re looking at your stories or you’re writing from the point of view of someone who’s totally different from you, how do you climb into that character’s perspective and write in a believable way?

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I start with a premise, particularly with bad guys. Bad guys think they’re good guys. I don’t write serial killers and people who are just crazy. My bad guys are all trying to do bad things for reasons that make sense to them, and they want what they’re doing as badly as my guys want to stop them and they feel righteous in their ‘bad-dom.’ I think that it’s really important to respect all of your characters’ points of view. I write a lot of kids. You can’t be in this business and not write about kids. And you’ve got to respect kids. You take the clichéd teenaged girl or teenaged boy, they don’t really care about anything, they’re kind of clueless and all of this, and that’s fine to kind of throw that away in conversation, but when you’re writing about them, that’s not what they think. Their world is very important to them and we might think it’s silly that you’ve got to wear a certain kind of clothes or whatever it is that they’re obsessing with, but yet that was very important to them. It was very important to me at that time in my life. So the idea, I believe, is to take those characters seriously and develop them accordingly. The funny kid is often covering for something else. So rather than having a jughead-type character from the Archie comics who’s just sort of a goof, it’s far more interesting to have that funny kid and then they have those private moments and what it is that he’s covering up by being funny. So that’s my approach. It goes back to the method acting. I put on their skins—I created them, for crying out loud, I should be able to know what they’re doing—and I just try to look at the world through their point of view. And if it’s more than one, if you have a mother and son or two friends or whatever the case may be and they’re interacting, as I write from one point of view sometimes I discover that you know what, that’s not the most interesting one. They’re doing stuff together, right? So rather than describing it from Harry’s point of view, I’ll describe it from Mary’s point of view. And sometimes that little change makes all the difference in the scene working or not working.

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Yeah, that’s interesting. There’s that old adage out there that you should write what you know. I don’t necessarily agree with that, I feel like you should certainly write about what you’re familiar with, in a sense, so that it has authenticity, like for in your case if you’re writing about explosions or guns or something, you want to know the details of it. But for me I like to write about what I’m curious about or what I feel the most about. I’ve never been a serial killer or an FBI agent or a teenaged girl, but yet those characters appear in my books. It sounds like for you, too, it’s more important to climb into their skin than to write in a different way, and to really just climb into their eyes.

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Yeah. And I think that the ‘write what you know’ advice is, first of all, terrible advice, because people take it literally. “I’ve never been a cop; how can I write about a cop?” That’s really not true. There’s a thing broken in the house and you’ve investigated which of the kids broke it. It’s not hard to imagine detective work and the frustrations of being a detective. Where you run into trouble is if you try to get into the weave of how actual police do what they do. You can research, or you can write around it. You can have a private investigator who calls up his cop buddy who gets him what he needs and we don’t have to know he does it. I have a character in my books, Venice Alexander, who’s a hacker extraordinaire. We just established her from the very first book and every book that’s succeeded. She’s just this whiz with computer stuff. Jonathan Grave is not. I don’t know… I can plug in a computer and I can use it as a typewriter. That’s pretty bad. I can search the internet. That’s all I know. So, Venice Alexander does remarkable things off-camera and then brings the results to me and to the character. So sometimes it’s about writing around what you don’t know.

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That’s interesting advice and I’ve never had anyone put it quite like that before. I like that. Sometimes you need to write around what you don’t know. That’s good. Now, John, when you first got started, was *Six Minutes to Freedom* one of your earlier books?

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That was my fifth book.

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The fifth book? And that one was just, for people who aren’t familiar with it, that one was actually based on true events that you interviewed someone for, is that right?

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Well, it wasn’t based on it. It was a nonfiction book.

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Oh, it’s nonfiction. Good, good.

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Yeah, it’s a nonfiction book, and at the time it was the only book that Delta Force, the Army assault group, had ever participated in and it’s kind of a long story how we got there, but it’s the story of Kurt Muse, who is a co-author on the book, who ran a resistance network against the Noriega and got arrested and… you know, yada yada, his family had to flee, his fifteen-year-old daughter and twelve-year-old son had to flee Panama alone because they were being hunted down by the PDF. And then he was ultimately rescued by Delta Force in a spectacularly successful mission called Acid Gambit. So that brought me into contact with the special forces groups at an extraordinarily close level, and so that allows me to… they answer my phone calls. You develop relationships with these folks. I can’t call the headquarters building and say, “Let me talk to a general,” but a lot of these guys are retired and I don’t want to know secrets, I don’t want to write about real-life operations, but I also don’t want to screw things up. How would you actually make entry into this situation, or what would be the wrong weapon to use?

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I feel like for you, getting those details right is huge and it also, to me, shows a high degree of regard and respect for your readers. You’re trying to give them something that’s legitimate. Clearly it’s made up, but you want it to be as authentic and believable as possible.

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Yeah, and frankly a lot of these guys—the operators and cops and what-have-you—I’ve actually trained with a lot of these folks and they’re readers of the books and I owe it to them not to really screw stuff up. It’s funny, I had a buddy of mine who’s a Navy Seal call me a few years ago, and I forget which book it was, but there was some bit of satellite technology in there and he was pissed, and he said, “John, you cannot reveal this kind of stuff, we talked to you and you can’t” yada yada, he went on and on, and I said, “Steve, I made that up. Nobody told me that, I made it up, but thanks. It’s good to know.” The reality is, and this could be encouraging to writers who want to write about technology kind of stuff, you can think of a way to track somebody or kill somebody, or interdict someone, it’s either real or there’s a top-secret development contract for it somewhere. I’m not smarter than the entire government complex. Somebody’s already thought of it.

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Yeah. I know. Years ago, I was working on my second novel and I thought, wouldn’t it be cool if there was a way to whistle a tune and then, on the internet, it could search for that tune? I thought, ‘That would be amazing.’ Now this was twelve, fifteen years ago, whatever it was, and there was nothing like that that I knew of. And so I was writing this story and I thought, ‘This guy is going to actually search for something based on the tune.’ Now today we think, ‘Clearly that’s not a big deal. It doesn’t seem that hard.’ But as I was working on the book I saw that one company had just come out with a way to do that, to do music-based searches. And I was like, ‘Crap, I thought I was ahead of the curve!’ But no, I was behind the curve, even as clever as I thought I was being. And now today that seems not cutting edge at all. Stuff moves and changes quickly out there.

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It does. And one of the advantages for me with Jonathan Grave is freelance. He’s actually technically a private investigator, but he does precious little private investigating. Because he’s now a civilian, I can actually get away with using technology that is recent but not necessarily cutting-edge. Because he’s not really… he’s a former Delta operator but he’s not a current Delta operator, and he’s self-funded so there’s only much… he’s very wealthy but there’s only so much he can afford. It’s about writing around potential weaknesses. Nobody can gig me for not using the model .45 instead of the model .43. He bought the model .43 two years ago so he doesn’t have the… you know?

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Yeah, interesting. John, are there any lessons that you’ve learned as your writing career has progressed that you wish you had known earlier in your career?

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Yes. Think less and enjoy more. I think people get… and I do it, too. You get wrapped around the axle on ‘How am I going to do this?’ ‘Why did two books ago do better than the last book?’ or, ‘Why did the…’ all this stuff over which you have no control. Just keep your head down and write. I had a real problem in 1996 when my first book came out, Ethan’s Run. I mean, it was huge. International bestseller. It really, really made a mark. And it was my first book, and now I have to sit down and write another book, and I thought, ‘Well… oof.’ So I stewed for a long time. They call it Sophomore Syndrome, or whatever. I stewed for a long time about what was it about that book that people really liked and what is it I’m supposed to replicate? Finally, it was my wife who said, “John, they liked your story. Write another story.” As only wives can do. It sounds dismissive when I say it, but it was like, you know, get over yourself and write another freaking story. You signed the contract. And that became *At All Costs,* and that became another. It also did very well. So I think the advice is, let it happen. If you’re a new writer, your first book is going to suck. I mean, your real first book. My first book was my fourth book, so I wrote three for the drawer.

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Oh, okay. Yeah.

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So really, really, your first writing effort? It’s going to suck. Get over it. And the next one, if you’re a craftsman and you’re good at this, the next one will suck less than the first one, and ultimately, if you do this enough and you complete the project, force yourself to go from beginning to the end, soon enough you learn enough craft and skill to make it work. Relax. Enjoy the ride.

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I like that. Enjoy the ride, because it can be stressful. And I think you’re right, that we do get caught up on stuff that we have no control over. Especially today, it seems like there’s so much pressure from publishers to get out there and market the book. Not necessarily that we’re self-published or self-marketed, but they want you to tweet and they want you to have a blog and whatever, and keep up to date in your newsletter, and all of these things, and I just think, ‘Man, that’s not my specialty. I’m a storyteller, not a marketer. I’m not a salesman, man, I’m just a guy who likes to tell stories.’

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Well, I think we need to pick our targets. I decided to focus primarily… I got a YouTube channel, Author John Gilstrap, where it’s kind of an insider’s view of writing and publishing. And I do have a newsletter that I send out occasionally. I’m not as regular on it. And I do some Facebook stuff, which is John Gilstrap Author. And I like to get out, I like to teach, I like to meet people. I’m one of the few authors who’s truly the Type A personality. I’m a true extrovert. I love being out with folks and meeting them. That stuff, the face-to-face stuff, I’m all over that. I love conferences. I like all of that. That’s easy for me. But you’re right, there’s only so much time to sit around and type on the keyboard, and I don’t get Twitter. I mean, I have Twitter, I have 26,000 followers on Twitter, thank you very much, but I don’t know what to do with them. I could say, “I had a nice time talking with Steven James on a radio show today,” and I did, I am, but does anybody care? Everybody follow you very tight and I don’t mean that as anything but good, but I mean, who cares what I do?

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I know, I feel the same way about things, too. And they say, “No, no, people want to know!” I just think… I don’t get it. It’s just not my wheelhouse. But that’s why I like what you say. It’s like, “Do what you can. Just chill, enjoy the ride.”

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I was at a seminar this past weekend that was conducted by Mystery Writers of America. I forget what the title of it was, but it was a bunch of one-hour speeches. And it was about marketing and stuff that I don’t understand, and a lot of buddies of mine were there. There was one lady up there who was talking about her strategy to give away books. And apparently this site where you sign on with them and you pay them $500 bucks and they’ll give away 1500 of your books. How does that even make sense? And I’m sure I’m not making light of her, she said it was very successful for her, but I don’t understand how giving away 1500 units of your product is anything but bad.

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I think the end goal is that they become a fan and buy your next books. At least, that’s from what I understand, the approach, the strategy is that they become hooked on it. But I know. The first book that I had come out, my publisher was like, “Yeah, we want to give this away.” I was like, “What do you mean, you want to give it away? I just spent a year of my life on that book.” “No, we just want to give it away for this one day on this one site…” I don’t know what it was. And to me, I was like, ‘This is crazy, what are you even talking about?’ But that’s the marketing world, and that just somehow works out, I suppose.

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One of the best marketing things I ever saw… now, this was way, way, way back, about the time Nathan’s Run came out, so we’re talking the ‘90s, I was taking a train to New York, and every seat on the Amtrak—this was from the DC area, so you know, a three-four hour train ride—and every seat on that train had this little red pamphlet, which was the first three chapters of a book. I should plug it; I can remember the cover but I can’t remember the title. But anyway, it was really compelling stuff. So I read those first three chapters. And then when you got off the train at Penn Station, there was a huge stack of books for sale. So, there’s a line because you’ve got all these folks who are addicted on the first three chapters and they want more. I thought, ‘God, that was brilliant.’

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I love it. That’s interesting. Yeah, that’s pretty cool, and you’ve got books for sale right there after people… they dip their toes in and then they want to dive all the way into the story. So, John, tell us a little bit about *Total Mayhem,* your newest book.

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Yeah, *Total Mayhem* is the eleventh book in the Grave series and I hasten to add that there’s no necessity to read these books in order. *Total Mayhem* takes terrorism to kind of a scary level. Well, as if there’s another way. This is very domestic, and what has happened is that the opening sequence is a slaughter, essentially, at a high school football game in the Midwest. And the shooter is somewhere, nobody knows where they are and a bunch of people are killed, and it turns out that that was one of three such incidents on that night at that hour throughout the country. And what has happened is that a betrayal within the hierarchy of the federal government has allowed ISIS, in this case, to essentially franchise out their terrorism. They take disgruntled Americans and pay them a lot of money, and just keep ratcheting up the terror. The second incident involves explosions. Setting bombs. And the third one, which is kind of the third act, is really horrific. It involves kids on Halloween. And that’s what we’ve got to stop. So it’s just the… trying to bring it to middle America. I talked about, in a thriller, the stakes have to be large?

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Sure.

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Sometimes they just need to be personal. In 2001 or so, and this is kind of the kernel for the story, you recall the DC sniper. There was one guy—it was two, but we thought it was one—and we thought he was in a white van, that turned out not to be true, either. But he would, every day, shoot one person. And he stopped the city. People were afraid to pump gas. People were afraid to go out. And he wasn’t concentrated. Some of it was in Maryland, some in DC, some in Virginia, some in southern Virginia, so he was going all around and people were terrified. And I thought, ‘That, as a practical matter…’ I mean, 9/11 was horrific. We all know how horrific 9/11 was. But for those who weren’t directly involved, it wasn’t really personal. If you weren’t at the Pentagon, if you weren’t at the Towers, if you weren’t on the planes or whatever, you grieved for strangers. But it was over. And to have one guy randomly popping people, shut the city down. So I thought, ‘Bring terrorism to that granular level in middle America and it stops everything. It crushes commerce, it really hurts the US.’ So Jonathan and his team are brought in, actually by the FBI, to help take care of it. It was a fun book to write.

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Wow. Man, it sounds intense.

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It is intense. Among the books I’ve written, there are always lighter… you’ve always got some, you know, but precious few. It is an intense book.

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And this is the eleventh one, but people don’t need to read them in order, so they can go and pick up this one and then…

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Yes, it’s on sale—well, you can’t buy it now—you can preorder it or it’s on sale on June 25th.

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Alright, yeah, excellent. I also wanted to ask a quick question about the big screen. I know when you write for a movie or even a television show, everyone who sees the film sees the exact same thing as the director’s or the cinematographer’s vision of what the film should be, but when we write, everybody sees something different. And especially writing action sequences… I watch some movies sometimes and I’m like, ‘That was amazing. I have no idea how I would write that scene of what they just did.’ When you write action sequences for your stories, do you have any secrets that you use to try and make those visually interesting to readers?

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Yeah. You keep it very close to the character. Really dial it into whoever owns the scene. I think they call it ‘close-in third person,’ but I don’t know. Every scene belongs to a character, so if Jonathan is being shot at, we’ll be in Jonathan’s point of view, if it’s somebody else we’ll be in his point of view. And keep it very intense to what they hear, see, smell, feel, their heartbeat, their sight-picture, their… and that keeps it really organic in the reader’s mind, too. You’re not watching some…Like Saving Private Ryan. One of the greatest action sequences ever filmed. And we are horrified just by the carnage, and that was the point. But if you’re doing that in a book, you can talk about bodies flying and all that, but it’s far better told from the point of view of one guy who’s jumping off the landing craft and nearly dies, and he runs into this and runs into that and he’s nearly shot or he is shot, or… That makes that action scene much more compelling on the page than sort of that omniscient, “all this stuff has happened.” Does that make sense?

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Yeah, and I like that. That’s a good way to look at it. I know that I sometimes… I really love action sequences both in movies and in books. Chase sequences and fights and so on. But I always find them difficult to write in a way that is personal and escalates and I think, just getting back to the moment of saying, “Okay, this is one character who’s experiencing this with his senses, with his emotions.” Maybe it doesn’t matter so much if he’s throwing a right hook or a left uppercut or whatever, but that we’re present in that moment of that fight. Something like that. I can take that away from what you just said.

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Yeah. I think that’s right. I don’t think I’ve ever written a car chase scene.

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Interesting, yeah.

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Because I always find them boring. I mean, some of them are really well-done, but you know, “Okay, we’re at the 60% part of the Scorsese movie, so it’s time for the car chase.”

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So, any parting words of advice for aspiring novelists.

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Yeah. Stick to it. You’ve got to want it. And even if you want it, the sitting down and writing is going to be really hard, but you’re going to do it because you’re going to want it. And the journey is in the writing, it’s not in having been published. If you start out on a writing journey to have a book on the shelf, your chances of success are really small. If your purpose of getting into writing are to entertain people and to really give them a good ride, you’ve got an excellent shot. You just have to develop your skill.

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That’s good. That’s a good moment to end on. So thank you so much, John, for your time and for being on the show. I really appreciate it.

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It was a lot of fun.

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Yeah, it’s good to hear some of your perspective and it’s neat to hear, too, of another person who kind of works and polishes as he goes. So often when I speak with people, they’re like, “Oh, you have to write the whole book and then go back and revise the whole thing. Just get it done, get the first draft done.” And I’m like, “Man, that doesn’t work for me.” So it’s encouraging to hear that you have a similar approach of re-reading what you did a day or two days before and then, by the time you get to the end, boom, the book’s pretty much done.

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And also, another thing to tell people: There are no rules. What works for me may not work for you at all, and if something works fabulously well for an author you really admire, that doesn’t mean your process is going to be the same. We’ve all got to get there our own way.

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Yeah, the process is always different. The principles of storytelling tend to be a lot broader and a lot more universal than whether or not you write with an outline or don’t. So, what’s the best place for people to connect with you online, either to order your books or to… you mentioned Twitter, you have a following on Twitter but it’s not really your thing so much. Is there another way people can email you or…?

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Johngilstrap.com. The website is johngilstrap.com. Facebook is johngilstrapauthor. Twitter is @johngilstrap. It’s kind of a theme. And all of the above are accessible through my website, which is johngilstrap.com.

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I encourage people to check out the sites and even more to check out the book. If you’re not familiar with the series, go ahead and get the newest one, *Total Mayhem,* and give it a read. Thanks to everybody for listening in today. For more information about our other guests and to check out other broadcasts, click to thestoryblender.com. You can check out any of my books at stevenjames.net. And folks, always remember:

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The art of the story is all in the blend.

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We’ll see you next time.