

# Coben Reveals Secrets to Success



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A recent [Brainwave](#) program focused on a best-selling author's approach to writing thrillers. The featured guest was [Harlan Coben](#), the 56-year-old author of 30 novels (seven *New York Times* No. 1 bestsellers) and a Jersey guy with a shaved head and a keen sense of humor. Matching wits and finding neuroscience angles was [David Eagleman](#), the Stanford University-based author of *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* and *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*, and the writer and host of the Emmy-nominated PBS television series *The Brain*.

The Rubin Museum in New York City advertised the science of suspense as the program's theme, but the conversation covered any number of areas that a writer of thrillers considers: memory, empathy, manipulation, human nature, and consciousness, to name a few.



Coben explained that he helped jumpstart his thought process for his next book by sitting and observing people in Strawberry Fields in Central Park for three days.

Coben's stories almost always contain woods and basketball and are set in North Jersey, where he lives (Ridgewood) with his pediatrician wife and two dogs. Growing up in a loud, Jewish home in Livingston, he said storytelling was essential to be heard at the dinner table. Even with four children, he says he still thinks of himself as a 17-year-old who is waiting for his life to begin. He believes that every individual has their own compelling story to tell and, in discussing human nature, said with a twinge of sarcasm, "We think we are uniquely complex, and no one knows what is really going on inside us. At the same time, we all think we are very good at reading the thoughts of others."

He stressed that every successful writer of fiction uses empathy, but be careful not to confuse empathy and sympathy. "The character doesn't have to be likable, but my job and every writer's job is to understand and relate their experience—to get inside their skin." In building suspense, he utilizes the "what if" factor and said a goal is to "turn every situation on its head to play with the reader's expectations and perceptions."

Coben's number one priority is to make every sentence compelling so that the reader not only wants, but *needs* to keep reading. "If someone plans on reading my book in bed for 20 minutes before falling asleep, my goal is to have that person up until 4 in the morning," he said. "That may be mean, but that's the challenge."

On completion, "there is nothing left in the tank," he explained. "I'm always completely drained and rarely look back at one of my books again." He also is one to never push a new idea to the next book, and integrates all good ideas that come into his head into his current work. This was a departure from Eagleman's approach, who said that when he gets a new idea while writing, he places it inside "a separate mental bucket." Upon completion, Eagleman might have four or five mental buckets that may come to light six or seven years later.

Coben himself seems to be living as close to his dream as it's possible to get, and approaches his life "by always trying to keep moving forward." He was brutally honest about people who claim they only write for themselves. "That's like saying, 'When I talk I don't care if anyone hears me.' I consider that therapy, not writing."