

Avoiding Some of the Pitfalls of the First Novel

Or

Where do I find Answers
to Questions I Have Not Yet Even Asked?

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Introduction

Several years ago, I came up with a great idea for a novel. Set in Korea during the last days of the Korean conflict, a US Army intelligence officer has been assigned to accept the defection of a high-ranking North Korean general. The US officer walks into a North Korean village, disappears into a hut, and then the hut explodes.

Fifty years later, the officer's grandson shows up in Oregon ready to cause trouble. How did he get there? Why is he there? Can he be stopped?

The novel, which later became *The Brothers Pendergast, Book IV: Suppositions*, might seem eerily similar to *The Manchurian Candidate*, but there are many plot twists, which, I hope, make it stand out from *The Manchurian Candidate*.

There was, however, one big issue. I had no characters, no concepts, and no foundation developed for the novel after the initial two pages. I had a name for the anti-hero, and an idea of how he got there, but after he walked into the hut in Korea, there was nothing. I had an idea for *Suppositions*, and felt it could become a fantastic mystery, but I needed to write *The Pendergast Prerogatives* (renamed to *The Brothers Pendergast, Book I: John*) to create my Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter 1

Is the Novel I Am Writing the One I Should Be Writing At This Time?

After I formulated the basic concepts of *The Brothers Pendergast, Book IV: Suppositions*, I realized I had no one to solve the mysteries I planned to introduce in the book. Who would be my hero? How would my hero solve the mysteries? I had a villain, but no hero to ride in to save the day.

I wrote perhaps ten pages of *The Brothers Pendergast, Book IV: Suppositions* and then put the draft away for safekeeping. A few years later, I began to work on *The Brothers Pendergast, Book I: John*, in which I created John Pendergast, the sometimes-reluctant hero of the following two novels, *The Brothers Pendergast, Book II: The President's Wife is Missing* and *The Brothers Pendergast, Book III: Alternatives*. Now I had my hero. When I finally completed *The Brothers Pendergast, Book III: Alternatives*, I was ready to finish *The Brothers Pendergast, Book IV: Suppositions*.

I had developed a hero who could solve problems, or ask for help from friends and family to solve those problems. The novel I had started many years before, *The Brothers Pendergast, Book IV: Suppositions*, now had the hero it so dearly needed. I had the ability to color in the photographs in my mind and give my novel the details it was missing.

I could have inserted *The Brothers Pendergast, Book IV: Suppositions* at any point after *The Pendergast Prerogatives*, but the ideas that produced the other novels were coming fast and furious.

However, it is important to establish a time-line for your novels, if you plan to start a second novel as soon as you finish the first, thus making a series.

My first completed novel in the Pendergast series was *The Pendergast Prerogatives*, which later became *The Brothers Pendergast, Book I: John*. My second completed Pendergast novel was *The Pendergast Solution*, which later became *The Brothers Pendergast, Book II: The President's Wife is Missing*. The third novel was *The Pendergast Alternatives*, which later became *The Brothers Pendergast, Book III: Alternatives*.

I know it's a little tricky, but if I had written *The Pendergast Suppositions* first, all of the other *Pendergast* novels would have been prequels. I would be constantly explaining how John got where he was, not putting him through the tests and trials he was destined to go through. It is beyond confusing to start in the middle of series and work in two directions, attempting to establish the characters,

and then working toward a finality that is constantly changing. It confuses the author and the reader. I am easily confused, so I wanted that problem eliminated.

Chapter 2

Why Am I Writing This Booklet? Or Do I Know Enough About What I Am Writing To Be The Sole Authority?

Once you have decided you are going to write a novel, the next big question will be what will it be about? Alternatively, why did you pick this particular subject matter?

Let us use *Avoiding Some of the Pitfalls of the First Novel* as a case in point.

Why is this booklet being written? My goal is to prevent my fellow authors from having to go through the same pain and agony as I did when slamming into the obstacles to my writing. I do not have every solution for every pothole in your highway, but perhaps I can point you in the right direction. Moreover, I hope I can repay the efforts some of my fellow authors expended on my behalf.

I will be the first to admit I have made many mistakes in bringing my first five novels to print. However, they were mistakes I was not even aware I was making until after the mistakes were made.

Two years after *The Pendergast Prerogatives* was in print, I finally discovered it would fail even the most basic fiction writing standards. I think a high school sophomore could do better than I had done. My introduction to writing took place in high school, almost fifty years ago. I got the usual assignments for short stories in English class, and got high marks on what I turned in. And, I was told I had a gift for words.

I did use that gift for words a few years later in writing electronic technical manuals, but how does a technical manual and an adventure novel relate? They are only distant cousins in the writing field. I know I never created any good dialog in any of my technical sheets.

Prior to my initial stab at writing, I composed two books of poetry. Those books of poetry got excellent reviews from family members who knew me and wondered how those words came out of my fingers.

Then, *The Pendergast Prerogatives* took place on my word processor.

After completing *Prerogatives*, I made some decisions about how I would offer the novel to my soon-to-be vastly interested readership. Then, I sat down and waited for the orders for my books to start flowing in.

When I published *Prerogatives*, I chose a self-publisher that issued a royalty statement every six months. I was totally flabbergasted when my first invoice arrived in my email inbox. Not one reader had purchased *The Pendergast Prerogatives*, or *The Pendergast Solution*, submitted for publication only a few weeks after *Prerogatives*.

I had not yet reached the panic stage after the first invoice. I had been hard at work writing *The Pendergast Alternatives* and *The Pendergast Suppositions*. Without asking why the previous novels had no sales, I submitted *The Pendergast Alternatives* for publication with the self-publisher that published my first two novels.

I did, however, make a small change in how I published *The Pendergast Suppositions*. I used Amazon's CreateSpace. Much to my delight, CreateSpace has actually produced royalties.

While I was finishing the development of *The Pendergast* series, I came up with a new hero, Ryce Dalton, and started the first of a new book series, *The Alberta Connection*, a Ryce Dalton novel.

After four *Pendergast* novels, I was thrilled with the new Ryce Dalton novel. So thrilled, I submitted the book to BK Writers Block for a critique (as of 2-26-2015, BK Writer's Block no longer exists as a blog site). I still have the reply from BK Writers Block, and I frequently revisit the trauma. Yes, it was trauma. I have not seen that much red ink even on my bank account. In the two pages of the critique, more than half was red. Almost every sentence required revision. I think I could have hired a monkey to pound on a keyboard and have results that did not require as much editing.

After digging myself out of the depression caused by two pages telling me I knew how to type, but certainly did not know how to write, I began to search for answers to why I had so rudely been edited.

Following the suggestions of BK Writers Block, I searched the Internet for solutions to my agony. After many days, I finally reached the point where I could read the edits without tearing up and began to understand what I was doing wrong. As difficult as it was to accept, I was forced to admit I was simply not a writer. I could compose words and ideas, but composition was not enough. I needed to discover the tools needed to actually write. Finding some of those tools will be revealed in this booklet.

You may have taken writing courses that have prepared you for many of the pitfalls you will encounter in producing your first novel. However, if I can provide

one small suggestion to keep you from falling into the same pits I have been digging out of for two years, I will have completed the goals of this booklet.

I am not an authority on how to write a novel, but I am an authority on how **not** to write a novel. I have five novels in print (seven, as of 6-2-2015). Four of them should be tossed in the circular file. I hope to someday completely rewrite them. At this moment, I am proud of only *The Alberta Connection, a Ryce Dalton novel*, and even it is being revised. The *Pendergast* series might contain some great ideas, but they will make me proud only when they have risen out of the ashes.

Author's Note: As of 2019, I have one book in print on CreateSpace, *Avoiding Some of the Pitfalls of the First Novel*. I had three books in print at two vanity publishers, but the contracts have expired. I also have *The Alberta Connection* on Kindle but it is in a locked condition. I don't know what that means.

Chapter 3

What Should I Do Before I Write One Word Of My Novel?

Before the first word is placed on paper, an author must decide what he/she plans to write about. I love reading Robert Heinlein, but I doubt a *Stranger in a Strange Land* will ever be the result of my efforts with words. Nor do I believe I will write the next Dr. Seuss novel.

However, I do have some experience in computers and the Internet, and have had friends who were SEALs. It has been relatively easy to incorporate those experiences into characters in my books.

In order to be a good author, we need to be the resident expert about what we are writing. What does that really mean? First, you are the pro. You know the characters in your novel better than anyone else does. You know what they are going through, where they have been, and where they are going. You are the final authority of the contents of your novel.

You must take what you know and make it interesting for your readers. You must translate the pictures in your mind into the colors and details that will draw your reader into your world. If you create a bland canvas devoid of color and details, your reader will not stick around for the complete landscape.

How does that come about? The first words of the first paragraph of your first novel should create excitement in your readers. This means you need to be excited about what you are writing. If you are not excited, your reader will not be excited.

If I was to consider writing a children's novel, which I can assure you will never occur, I would need to become excited about children. I have a self-confessed limited knowledge of children, although I do have several grandchildren.

If you can create excitement in yourself about what you are writing, the readers will feel the excitement, and will be drawn into the world you create. If the first paragraph of your novel hooks the reader to read the second paragraph, you have met the requirements of being a writer.

How important is knowing your material, and drawing the reader into the world you intend to create?

I would like to quote Joan Adamak, a reviewer of *The Alberta Connection*, a Ryce Dalton novel.

“The scenes are extremely well developed and the reader is right there, a part of the scenes. This book would particularly appeal to men, I think, because it is so masculine and action motivated, yet it is not devoid of romance and love. I liked this story and recommend this book.”

To draw someone into my world, he/she needs to be part of that world. The reader cannot be an observer, but a participant.

Joan Adamak has probably done more in the development of me as an author than any single person has. I consider her words to be the icing on my writing cake. It is too bad they came because of my fifth novel.

In summary, before a word is placed on paper, a writer needs to know what he/she is writing about. They need to know everything forward and backward. They need to awaken at 3:00 AM with a new idea that perfectly aligns with the previous ideas on the pages.

Above all, do not try to convince an angler you know how to fish if you have never cast your first worm in the lake, and reeled in your first trout. If you know your subject, you can create the world that needs to be fashioned to bring your readers into your universe.

Chapter 4

I Have An Idea. Where Do I Go From Here?

It would be wonderful if no writer ever received the email I got which started my personal discoveries as a writer, the two pages of the total destruction of my writing world. First, there would be no days of depression. Second, all of the self-publishing companies could just sit back and rake in the money from all of their perfectly written novels. Or, they would just be out of a job.

However, there would be no discovery of writing talent, no hours expended in finding out what the mistakes were, why the mistakes were made, and how to fix them.

I suggest the first stop after discovering an idea for a novel is to spend hours on the Internet. Perhaps you have already taken a writing course, have been in the top of your class, and have written the first fifty thousand words of *War and Peace*. However, if it has been one course, or even two, you have painted only one side of your house. You have one perspective on writing, which may be a great perspective, but it is still only one view.

Someone once told me there is only one way to build a fence. First, install fence posts in the ground. Second, install the fencing material. The fence is finished. Yes, there is only one way to install a fence, but there are millions of pieces to consider when you decide what you want the fence to look like.

While there might be only one way to write a novel, by typing many words on many sheets of paper, how those words are placed on the paper is what makes the novel. The interaction of the words on the pages is what makes the reviewer write that it is an extremely well written novel..... and not something that should be used as bedding for a hamster.

After you have written down your idea for a novel, yes, **WRITE IT DOWN**, take a few steps back. If you still have the course materials from your writing class, flip through them a few times, looking for something that draws your attention. Did you take notes? Make the notes your focus the first few times you check your materials.

If you did not sign up for a writing course, your next step is to collect ideas about writing. The first place to find good ideas is BK Writers Block. It is still at <http://bkwritersblock.blog.spot.com>.

What are you looking for? First, read everything posted in **Write-ology**. These are fantastic sources of information about writing. Be sure to go back through the archives.

When I returned to *The Alberta Connection* after my unpleasant email, my first project was to read every Write-ology post available. There are 121 posts listed in the archive, with many writing exercises. Do the exercises to gain familiarity with writing techniques.

Reading every post consumed perhaps three weeks. I then went back to the email, and re-examined every edit of *The Alberta Connection* using the information I had acquired from the BK Writers Block postings.

Most surprising to me during my evaluation of the edit process was I actually understood why the changes were being suggested. I could see why back story was not an appropriate way to start out a novel. And, I saw the biggest issue I had as an author. I wrote as I talked and thought, in 40-60 word blocks, usually with three or four disparate and disjointed ideas. No wonder family members who tried to read my novels told me they liked most of what I had written, but they did not understand much of it.

I had a two-page email with all the editing information, but my actual novel was still the same as it had been when I submitted it for syndication. I began a comparison process, displaying both versions side-by-side on my monitor. I studied what I had written, compared it with the results of the BK Writers Block edit, and then checked my changes against the Write-ology posts.

I do not recommend taking notes when reading Write-ology, except for the writing exercises. The ideas presented are concepts. They must be intimately incorporated into your writing skills, not be part of a reference manual to be checked when a mistake is discovered. They must become automatic, a brief flash of insight changing a few words.

Eventually, I made many of the changes suggested, and I found several instances where I modified the edits provided by BK Writers Block. Wow, could the student actually be suggesting the teacher is wrong? No, the student did not find an error by the teacher. The student simply used the tools provided by the teacher, and made changes suggested by the teacher.

After I completed re-writing the two pages I had received from BK Writers Block, I dove head first into the rest of the novel. I spent countless hours adding, deleting, revising and re-revising my many hours of work. I am not sure how many times I went through the novel from page 1 to the final page. I have several note pads with page numbers listing where I stopped in my editing process. Perhaps I should have kept my lists to tell me which pages needed more than one

edit. When I felt the novel was up to my new standards, I submitted it for a critique, but not the BK Writers Block critique.

The next critique was not as traumatic as BK Writers Block, but I still had issues. I immersed myself in the Internet once again. The first, new concept I discovered was to “Show, Don’t Tell”.

The easiest way to understand the “Show, Don’t Tell” rule is to consider where your readers are positioned when reading your novel. If the reader is sitting in his/her easy chair, watching what your characters are doing, you are telling. If the reader is hiding behind the same rock as your hero during a gunfight, you are showing.

After several additional days of editing, I submitted my manuscript to be critiqued once more. I had made progress. Apparently, I had been learning. There were still some missing commas, a misspelled word or two, and a few basic editing problems, but the differences between the first version of the novel I had written almost a year ago and the one I recently submitted, were like night and day.

During the final editing process, I realized I had read over one hundred pages from the Internet. What did I learn?

First, back-story is often a hindrance more than a help. Yes, it is important to explain why your characters do the things they do, or why they have done the things they have done. However, dumping several paragraphs of back-story into the flow of the novel will cause the reader to walk to the icebox for a soda, and may never return.

I solved that issue by using character dialog, having two characters explain the back-story as part of a conversation. It kept the flow of the scene intact, and explained what was happening without going back several years in the time-line.

Look for creative ways in your novel to tell the back-story. Have two characters bump into each other in the hallway and discuss why a third character did something. Or, during an intimate moment, have your heroine ask your hero how he got his name. It does not interrupt the flow, but provides a background to the scene. There will be many ways to explain the past by using conversations, and not through a separate back-story.

While I edited *The Alberta Connection*, a Ryce Dalton novel, I continued to search the Internet for basic information on how to write a book. I eventually discovered the final piece required for my writing skills: *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers - How to Edit Yourself into Print* by Renni Browne and Dave King. I rushed to my neighborhood library and checked out the book.

I am sure you are all wondering why searching the Internet for ideas about writing is important. Simply stated, **all knowledge is good**. In addition, learning a

little more about how to write your novel is definitely the best of the good knowledge.

I am also positive I did not absorb everything in the BK Writers Block posts. Nor did I absorb everything in the many posts I copied from various blogs to use in The Book Reviewers Club blog, of which I am the blog master. With the help of BK Writers Block, Joan Adamak, Deb Peters, and countless Internet sources, I was allowed to see the areas where I needed the most improvement.

Why should you make an effort to investigate the science of writing? I am sure you will not make all the mistakes I have made, and will likely not require every tip available for writing. However, you may find the one truth your novel needs to make it into the next. *War and Peace*.

Chapter 5

I Think It Is Finished

How Do I Get It On the Top of the Best Seller's Lists?

Now that you have completed your novel, it is time to find some way to put it in front of millions of possible readers. A short look back at other authors might help get you onto some bookshelves.

One of my favorite authors, John D. MacDonald, had a hero named Travis McGee. Each novel of the Travis McGee series had a title with a color. I knew I was getting my favorite hero with *The Deep Blue Goodbye*, *Nightmare in Pink*, or *A Purple Place for Dying*. I think I have read every book in the series. Why did I read the Travis McGee series? Because of the titles. The reason for the color in the title was often not explained until the last chapter of the novel.

I am confident that many of the books reaching the bestseller lists are because of the titles. They are the first hook you throw out to your readers. Your book might be finished, but a simple change in the title could make it a bestseller.

Although I always wished my name were Travis, I could not name my hero the same as John D. MacDonald's, so I chose John Pendergast. I liked the name Pendergast. Until I checked on Amazon, I thought he was the only hero with the name. However, after four Pendergast novels, and his inclusion in four other novels, I do not plan to change his name.

After I found the name of the hero, I needed to find a title. The title should relate to the contents of the novel, it should hook the reader, and perhaps even be a little off the wall. *The Pendergast Prerogatives* fit those requirements.

The definition of **prerogative**, as stated by The Free Dictionary by Farlex, is:

1. An exclusive right or privilege held by a person or group, especially a hereditary or official right.
2. The exclusive right and power to command, decide, rule, or judge
3. A special quality that confers superiority.

I would like you all to know that I did not decide the title should be *The Pendergast Prerogatives*. John Pendergast, who wrote a bank security program named *The Pendergast Prerogatives*, determined the title. The novel was so

named because of the rules John devised to create a series of decisions for computer operators. If the wrong decision is made, the program stops working.

With a complete book, a final hero, and a title in hand, I jumped into the deep end of the writing pool. I asked a couple relatives to review it, and then made my first and most fatal error.....I chose a self-publishing company to publish my first novel.

Why was submitting my novel to a self-publisher a fatality?

First, a self-publisher assumes you have a good product to present to the readers. They will change nothing. There will be no effort to correct the spelling mistakes, to fix the issues with grammar, or to assist in finding ways to make your novel a quality product.

Second, my novel, no matter how bad it is, will be stuck with that publisher for seven years. In two years, no copies of *The Pendergast Prerogatives* had been sold. At that rate of return, I think the publisher will take more than seven years to recoup the cost of the ISBN.

Note: the self-publisher did a fantastic job on the covers of all the books they published. They obviously had a graphics artist read the novel to get an idea of what it was about, but a graphic artist does not make a book editor.

After learning my lesson, I followed a different path in publishing *The Alberta Connection a Ryce Dalton novel* --- I put it on Amazon.

I could have used the paid support provided by Amazon to create my novel, but I decided I would take the least expensive route. I personally did the design for the cover of *The Alberta Connection* on Amazon's Create Space. It is a nice cover, but perhaps not as dynamic as one produced by a graphic artist. Moreover, I will design the cover for *Avoiding the Pitfalls of the First Novel*. I learned a great deal in the writing and editing process. Perhaps I have also learned something in the design of the cover.

Now that you have written your book, unless you know someone at a major publishing house, you might be on your own. However, there are many places, yep, on the Internet, which will give you some advice on what to do with your precious tome.

Before you submit the manuscript to CreateSpace, my best suggestion is to print the manuscript out, place it in a plastic bag, and then store it in your freezer for a few months. During the time you are freezing your thoughts, you can start your second novel.

Why? Because as you continue to write, you will continue to learn. On the first day of every month, I go back through the BK Writers Block blog, and read the Write-ology postings. On the second day of each month, I go through my postings on The Author's Club blog to revisit the research I have completed. I

have found there is always a tidbit to pick up. You can find The Author's Club blog at: (<http://theauthorsclub.wordpress.com>).

I often skip over some posts on either blog, but I try to glean something about writing from each visit. Why? Because I do not think I have learned **everything** about writing. I spent thirty years as a journeyman electrician. In all those years, I never considered I had a complete knowledge of the electrical trade. There was always one more energized light bulb socket to stick my finger into.

I am sure there are as many ideas on writing as there are blades of grass in my front yard. In addition, I am sure that I will never see every idea about writing that has been published. One famous author once commented that all rules of writing should be ignored. He could ignore them --- he had ten best sellers, and a couple of them had been made into movies.

This booklet is not a booklet of rules. Moreover, it is certainly not a comprehensive list of how to write a novel. It is simply a series of suggestions based on the abrasions I have on my shins from the pitfalls I have encountered. Perhaps I can help one other author spend a lot less money on bandages.

Dedication

This booklet is the result of a blog I posted on The Author's Club blog, in which I talked about some of the things I had gone through in publishing my novels. A blog reader suggested the information would be good for someone who was venturing into the writing world.

Therefore, this booklet is dedicated to the first-time writer, the author who has a book inside his/her head, but has not yet had the courage to walk off the edge of the writing cliff.

It took me more than forty years to go from the ideas for *The Pendergast Suppositions* to the actual words placed on paper. If one potential author can take his dream to the next level, I will be thrilled.

Author's Note: The following information is provided only as a reference. None of the books are available for review.

If you would like to review this booklet or any of my novels, please send me an email. (rclintpeters@gmail.com)

The following items are or will be made available for review:

The Pendergast Prerogatives. (available for review as a first edition novel, not yet revised)

The Pendergast Solution (available for review as a first edition novel, not yet revised)

The Pendergast Alternatives (available for review as a first edition novel, not yet revised)

The Pendergast Suppositions (available for review as a first edition novel, not yet revised)

The Alberta Connection, a Ryce Dalton novel

Avoiding Some of the Pitfalls of the First Novel

At the present time, the *Pendergast* series is available only in a full-sized 8.5x11 PDF file, suitable for viewing on your PC or MAC.

The Alberta Connection, a Ryce Dalton novel, is available in a Kindle-format version and 8.5x11 PDF file.

Some of my efforts in the world of writing are here:

Email: rclintpeters@gmail.com

Alternate email: theauthorsclub@gmail.com

The Author's Club blog: <http://theauthorssclub.wordpress.com>

R. Clint Peters Website: <https://ronaldepeters.wixsite.com/website>