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I have a beginning, middle and end—now I need to finish

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—A month after we moved to Blue Grass in 1983, a local fellow approached me: “I hear you’re a Ph.D.”

I confessed.

It’s not something that I use locally, and it has no relevance to anything I do here. Having known a little about international relations in 1977 gives me no traction on the neighborhood track, nor should it. (I’m not sure that it ever gave me traction on any other track while I’m on the subject.)

I left the degree itself in its original mailing container and buried it in a back corner of my clothes closet beneath a pile of spent running shoes that, upon their retirement, could barely walk.

“Yep,” he said. “Pee Aitch Dee. Piled Higher and Deeper.”

“I know some people,” I replied, “who are pretty good at that even without a degree.”

We had a good laugh and became friends.

As I’ve gotten older, my piles have, indeed, gotten higher and deeper. This would have occurred even without an official academic blessing.

In two offices and one store room, I now see rising mounds of paper—monthly statements; tax records; outdated studies; newspaper clippings; magazines; books I’ve read; books I’ve written; and books I’ve intended to read but won’t. Not to mention clothes that are not fit to wear but too good to rag out, and stuff that you never know when it might come in handy for something.

A fair description of just my paper piles would be “reeking havoc.” From which stench, orderly and wholesome thoughts could emerge. (I make this argument to my wife.)

One pile, in particular, has been nagging at me for almost 25 years. It’s a stack on the floor, about 12 inches high. It’s on tractor-printed paper. Dust swarmed on the top sheet and established a prosperous colony.

I always felt funny when I walked by this stack. I seemed to be ignoring a close relative in need.

Many people -- even some writers -- take a crack at a novel. I did. This pile is that crack.

As someone I know churned through law school in the late 1980s, I signed up for graduate fiction-writing seminars at the University of Virginia.

This allowed me to write lies without fear of prosecution. Writing a novel also amounted to a marginally defensible excuse to stop the unpleasantness of earning money.

Over 18 months, I produced about 600 pages in 51 chapters. I've always had the knack for writing by the pound.

When I started this book, I knew that I lacked three things that successful fiction writers have.

First, I didn't have an architect's eye that can lay out the step by step of imagining characters and fitting plot elements into a structure capable of standing on its own, shedding water and providing shelter.

Second, I didn't have either a formula or a genre. Oh sure, I had some murders and some sex, but not enough to work up a signature sweat, let alone a bestseller. (No respectable vampire wanted to be included even in the Acknowledgments; the zombies I contacted were already fictively employed.)

Third, I had only a minimal notion of a coherent story. Instead, I had details, settings, characters and scenes milling around like the flotsam of a ship that had just broken up on the rocks of life.

My collection of odds and ends -- many of the latter were also loose -- seemed to fall between the cracks of commercial success. I sensed from the start that a dollar of time invested in this project was not likely to be returned with interest, editorial and otherwise.

On the other hand, writing a novel seemed doable and maybe even worth doing. I wouldn't know whether I had something worth having written until I wrote it.

The story had to be good. If it was good enough to get me to turn my own pages, I hoped that one or two others -- outside of my nuclear family -- might be similarly disposed.

The scenes I had in mind were cinematic, which raised the dreaded specter of a movie deal. This raised even more troubling -- though highly theoretical -- concerns over "managing" fame and fortune, tiny as they might be. "Damn the torpedoes," I said. "I'm willing to be sunk."

I knew I could produce a book of outright lies, half-truths, semi-recalled events, snappy dialogue and sex scenes that my wife, who is *really* insisting on anonymity this week, wants every potential reader to know have nothing to do with her...or anyone else as far as she hopes. (I think she would be happy if a million people bought the book, and no one read it. I'm down with that, too.)

But I also knew that my story was not one that tapped into the *Zeitgeist* of America's book buyers. My bad guys had a few odd good qualities, and my good guys had some conventional bad ones. My "heroic" women were not the ones you'd expect. The character who was my narrative thread was pretty frayed, if you ask me. His love interest doesn't make it. The ending is less than happy. Both the story and my writing lacked the literariness that appeals to New York publishers. It was also set in the mid-70s and before; who wants to go back to that mess?

So, I asked myself back then, why not concede defeat before starting a losing battle? Just write a stupid formula series and live happily ever after. How about a soft-boiled detective in a hard-boiled world? Or a one-plot western recycled endlessly like the one that fed Louis L'Amour for a lifetime? Maybe I could wedge out a niche in romance novels using the pseudonym "Jane Dough."

No, I said, art comes before commerce; truth before lies; failure before sell out.

So, I said, write what you want and see if it amounts to anything.

So, I concluded, start. See what comes out.

Maybe abstract painters work this way. Maybe I'm an abstract writer.

I don't recommend this approach, but it was the best I could do with what I had.

I came up with an opening line: "'Don't do it, Jeep,' Becker said."

Six hundred pages later, I wasn't sure whether Jeep had done it or not.

A week or two after I stroked the last period in the last sentence of the last chapter, I decided that the novel wasn't good enough to spend another nine months making it as good as I could make it. Expenses were stalking the wild novelist. It was time to tuck it into a spot in long-term parking.

For reasons I can't explain, I don't like quitting projects. That was the main reason, I think, that I finished my higher and deeper pile of a degree. I've bowed to circumstances when I've had to, but I never felt right about it when I did.

I picked up the book stack this week, blew off the dust and read it. It's better than I remembered, which doesn't say much. I laughed at the funny lines and was surprised at the surprises.

It needs work beyond a polish and a buff. I'm sure I have too many characters, too many flashbacks and too many pages. I agree in advance that no fatal harm would be done if I were to snip a word or two from the top. I might close my eyes and also hack off the philosophical fur balls. (I'm comfortable serving up fur balls, but not philosophical ones.)

My book's first uncorrectable flaw is that it's still a pigeon of a story without a hole. And the second is that it will be rewritten by the same pig-headed writer who cooked up the first draft. Pig-headedness is not a choice.

If I work on it a day or two a week, I can get it done in a year.

And then it will be finished, and I will have done my duty.

You may be wondering what it's about.

Good. I'm working on the answer.

The working title is: The Point of the Pick.

It's not about basketball, though a lot of it has to do with backspin and funny bounces.

In the worst case, I'll simply add to my pile of paper and reaffirm my neighborhood reputation. In the best case, who knows?

It's worth a shot—just like Powerball.