

HOW LONG?

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When people ask me when I started writing, I tell them it was in 1980. My first story was published in the high school literary magazine, my next story won second prize at the National Honor Society's 1981 Florida State Convention, etc.

However, now I remember something older. I wrote my first short story in 1976. I was 13. This was for English class, at Trask Middle School in Wilmington, North Carolina. The title was "Dial O For Orgy."

Are you still reading?

I really wanted to say "Dial O For Occult," but vocabulary was never my strong suit. I don't recall the teacher ever doing anything to correct my mistake. But I've since learned that students sometimes have the power to leave a teacher totally speechless.

"Dial O For Orgy." Yeah, that could do it.

The title was a deliberately blatant rip-off of DIAL M FOR MURDER, which I've never even seen. You knew the title was a blatant rip-off, much like WHO MOVED MY RICE?, but maybe you didn't know it was deliberate. And hey, now Sue Grafton's writing an entire alphabet of mysteries, and their titles regularly appear in the crossword puzzles I use to help me with my vocabulary deficiency.

No, I don't remember my story. Something bad happens, our hero can't solve the problem, he consults somebody with a Ouija board (dial O for Ouija?) and lives happily ever after. Or something like that. I just thought you'd like the title. I swear, it wasn't about phone sex.

This is an excerpt from an unpublished interview. Deepa Kandaswamy asked me how long it took me to write each of my books. Funny that nobody else has ever asked me that.

- THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN - 21 years

From 1979 through 1985, I wrote short stories for magazine publication. Well, intended publication. The 100+ rejection letters amassed. One had a picture of a skunk on it. (Thunder Creek Publishing, Canada.) But I was stubborn. "My writing, my way, and if you won't take it it's your fault!" That is not the way to approach this business. Writing is a calling, but publishing is a business. It took me years to learn that. Twenty-one years, to be exact.

A friend read my short story collection and said it had not one single redeeming quality. I decided she was right, erased those Commodore 64 floppy disks, and went back to my security guard desk. About a year later, I realized I'd done a stupid thing.

(And with friends like that...)

1988, on my newly purchased but very old Osborne computer, I recreated the stories from memory. Best thing that could have happened to this particular book. I remembered the best bits and forgot the trash. I doubt you need to do anything so drastic.

Now we have to skip ahead again. 1995. I wrote a novel in three weeks despite working about 100 hours each of those weeks at a physically intense hog farm. The Muse grabbed me. I shopped the novel around but had no luck. Oh well. That wasn't a new experience.

Hong Kong 2000, I realized the obvious. The "novel" was too padded and puffy. Since it was the sequel to a short story from the undersized collection, I chopped it in half and added it to the collection as a novella. After this experience, plus the experience of running all my old stories through free on-line creative writing workshops and learning so much about how to

improve them, I began writing new short stories. The end result was THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN.

It will soon be reissued by Books Unbound, by the way, and you can rest assured that I'll shout it from the rooftops.

- * VIGILANTE JUSTICE - 11 years

Sometimes it takes a while to write that first novel.

My little brother, age 20, was a cop when he killed himself. I was a writer long before that. So I had to write about what he would be like "today" if he hadn't done it. I wrote 3-1/2 novels about "him" before throwing them away and abandoning the project. A few years later, I had a "eureka moment" and wrote a first draft in 1996. I wasn't able to find a publisher, largely because I hadn't written it well.

Skip ahead to 2000 in Hong Kong. Fresh off my short story collection, I dug this out of the slush pile and utilized all I'd learned to rewrite it. Judging by its readership and its status as an EPPIE finalist, I must have gotten something right.

- RISING FROM THE ASHES - 1 month

I was an old veteran by this time. My wife had spent 10 months telling me to "write my life story." She'd fallen in love with me because of how I told it to her. But I was afraid it'd bore people. Finally, the realization hit me. Don't write MY story. Write Mom's. She can't write it herself, because she's dead, but it needs to be told.

At a resort in Koh Samui, Thailand, I outlined it in one hour on hotel stationery. A striking contrast to the humble beginnings described in the book, and the only time I've ever used an outline. My longest book, my shortest writing time. Perhaps because remembering is faster than inventing. I consider this my finest work. The second of my three EPPIE finalists.

- AN AMERICAN REDNECK IN HONG KONG - 6 months

Though *RISING FROM THE ASHES* is women's literature and this is humor, this is the sequel. I ended the first book when my family died. I was 26 then. I wrote this when I was 38. I lived a lot of crazy stories in those 12 years, including the "infamous" hog farm stories. Again, a process of remembering instead of inventing.

The breakthrough moment was realizing that the chronological approach wasn't working. It was forcing me to retell the same backstories too many times. I organized this into theme-based sections, each section chronological and self-contained, and it all but wrote itself after that.

- WHO MOVED MY RICE? - 2 years

Things got even crazier after I left Hong Kong to "teach English" in mainland China, so it was only natural for me to chronicle all that. Two years? Yes, two years. I write slowly now. My third EPPIE finalist.

Now let's move on to what I've written since Deepa's interview.

- WHO MOVED MY UNDERWEAR? - 4 years

Actually, I took four years' worth of notes into NaNoWriMo 2007 and churned out 50,000 words. That finalizing process required a month.

- THE LAZARUS EFFECT - 4 days

Yeah, I'm picking up speed.

I wrote this on Christmas night 2001. That's right, 35,000 words in one night. I thought it was going to be an outline but it grew.

(Remember what I told you about Hemingway? Long periods of thinking, short periods of writing.)

After that came a few weeks of research and self-editing – I forget how many – before sending a printout to the US Copyright Office and then losing the electronic file.

Seven years later, I ordered a photocopy from the US Copyright Office, hired someone to type it, and spent about a week doing research while I waited for all that to happen. June 5 through 7, 2008, I edited the book and was pleased.

So “how long” is either 7 years or 4 days, depending on how you want to measure time.

- FLIGHT OF THE PEGASUS - 25 years and counting

It really is impossible to reckon time with this one. It's not the first novel I ever wrote, but it's the first one with any potential.

What I call “version 1” was about one of our first flights to another solar system, when we're clueless but smart-ass. This was very early 1980s.

When I was unable to publish it, rather than admit it just sucked for air, I re-invented it as a Star Trek novel. It gained a lot and lost a lot. “Version 2,” we'll call this, was equally unpublishable. Mid 1980s. And I gave up.

In 2007, I got an email from someone who kept the printout. Commodore 64, daisy wheel printer. Wow.

Version 3,” we can call this, is a total reinvention of everything, with months of research before I even laid my hands on the hilariously bad printout. And a new title – it was formerly known as SUICIDE MISSION.

I am pleased.

I have said that I can't remember the US well enough to set a novel there, and I can't understand Asia well enough to set a novel here. THE LAZARUS EFFECT and FLIGHT OF THE PEGASUS represent one solution to that problem.