

# Chapter 1

## Getting Started

I arrived in Los Angeles in 1972 in a yellow Toyota Corolla, with less than \$500 in my pocket, a guitar, and a few clothes that—if I still owned them—would comfortably fit into any Smithsonian “Hippie” exhibition. In fact, when I crossed the California state line they weren’t letting anyone in my age who didn’t drive a sub-compact car with a musical instrument in the back seat. And anyone with more than a thousand dollars to their name was turned back at the border.

But I was sure I was going to make it. How could I miss? I knew no one in the publishing, music or movie business. In fact, I knew no one in Los Angeles except for an old friend who was working 26 hours a day, 8 days and had no time to see me.

Where I came from—Toledo, Ohio—I was a star. From there, my only choices to kick my career into high gear were New York or Los Angeles. The last time I was in New York my band mates and I drove into the city, ate dinner and came out to find our instruments gone. Besides, it was a lot colder in New York in the winter.

So I came to LA to fulfill my dreams of becoming a rock and roll star. Although that dream was not achieved, most others were. Of my Top Ten Things I Wanted to Achieve in my Life, seven are checked off—becoming a rock and roll star seems destined to remain unfulfilled. But even that dream was partially realized because I played at many Southern California venues and managed to get my music published and into a film I directed in the 90s. And I recorded an album on which one of my heroes—Garth Hudson, keyboard player for The Band (Bob Dylan’s backup band, and a great band in their own right)—played accordion and sax.

After three weeks in Los Angeles I landed a job writing for an educational TV show to be produced in Mexico. The show had a pedigreed producer—I used to watch his TV show with my parents growing up in Ohio—and two other writers from “The Sonny and Cher Show.” Life was easy and I was eyeing a place in the Hollywood Hills.

Perhaps you know the end of this story. It is a common one. The show didn’t happen—which was tough on me because I sold my car. Who needs a car in Mexico City?

So, instead of living large south of the border, I was working the graveyard shift

at the Old World Restaurant on the Sunset Strip, going to and fro in a borrowed car, catering to *real* rock stars who would come in after working in the studio till all hours. Life in LA was getting harder.

I'll save the trials and tribulations of making it in LA for another book. In fact, I've sprinkled those adventures throughout my novels.

The bottom line is that I figured out a way to make money writing, then to make it into print as a novelist, and then to go on to publish 21 novels (to date), most with major New York publishers, as well as nine non-fiction books.

Occasionally I speak at universities or at various writing seminars. Without exception the person leading the class has never published a (non-self-published) novel. It occurred to me that I knew the answer to every question asked by students. I realized that if I were a student, I would rather get a class from someone who had actually done what I wanted to do, rather than from someone who had not.

I wrote the first version of this book in the 80s (*Writing the Mystery Novel*). In 2005 I spoke with someone at the Palos Verdes Art Center who had read a coffee table book I'd written entitled *Palos Verdes Peninsula Artists*. That person suggested I teach a writing class at the Art Center. I lived about two miles away and I admired the work being done there, so I readily agreed.

The class included writing novels of all kinds, not just mysteries. In fact, most of the chapters could be applied to writing any kind of book including non-fiction. In all, I taught four sessions of the class, each time making changes in the course.

I believe that new writers appreciate the candor and real-life wisdom that come from actually having done what they want to do. I've had my share of rejections slips, but I've also seen my books in the windows of the top New York bookstores.

The exercises are a very important part of this book. If you don't do them, you will not get much from this course. And if you believe that since you had something published, the exercises are beyond you, think again. My class consisted of many students who had books published. Add to that, I still do many of the exercises every time I write a book.

There are two parts to learning a new idea. The first is theoretical. You can understand something intellectually, but be completely incapable or unwilling to actually do it. If this were not true, everyone who read a book by Tiger Woods should immediately start playing great golf. Of course, that's not true. Even the great Tiger Woods practices almost every day and is known on tour as a player who practices more than most of his competitors. I've watched him on television

shoot a great round, walk off the 18<sup>th</sup> green in first place and head to the practice tee.

It took me nearly one million *published* words before I developed what I could call my own style. And when I don't write fiction for a while, it takes me time to get back into a groove again.

Feedback, though sometimes painful, is important. Repeating the same mistake over and over again does not help you grow. For me, the best thing that happened to me was hiring a magazine editor friend of mine to edit the first ten pages of my first novel. I will discuss this experience later in the book, even though it was quite humiliating at the time.

Let's be clear. Writing—particularly writing novels—is a specific skill and no matter how talented you are, that talent still needs to be developed because there are many talented people who want to be novelists. (Fortunately, for people who write, there is a difference between people who want to *be* a novelist and people who actually want to *write* novels. That narrows the field considerably.)

Many people think that just because you have a high school diploma and know the difference between an adjective and an adverb that you can write. I wrote for medical doctors before I started writing novels. Smart people? No doubt about it. Can they write? You might be surprised to discover that most are not good writers. But that can be said of most people who don't work hard at developing this specific skill.

I always find it a bit irritating when people tell me they've got a great idea for a novel and that the only difference between them and me, in terms of writing, is that I have more time on my hands. It would be like me telling one of my surgeon friends that the only reason I'm not as good a surgeon as he is, is because I'm too busy writing.

Good writing is a combination of talent, developed skill and lots of writing. You either have talent or you don't. Talent is the extra quality that initially makes one person stick out as a better dancer, a better musician, or athlete. It's something you're born with and it gives you a head start. Although it may be enough to coast on talent alone while you're a big fish in a small pond, if you want to dance for the New York City Ballet Company, or be a famous jazz musician, or play for the Yankees, undeveloped talent is not enough to take you there.

Developing your talent requires hard work. If you're lucky, along the way you'll get good advice, honest and quality feedback, and maybe even mentoring. It's not always obvious how to develop your writing talent. I've been lucky because my

parents are amateur writers and they always encouraged my writing. I also had a couple of teachers who encouraged my writing talent.

I've written ad copy, poetry, songs, articles, short stories, screenplays and novels. By far, writing the novel is the most demanding. Writing a poem is like a sprint. Writing an article is like a run around the block. Writing a short story is like running a 5K. Writing a novel is like running a marathon. There isn't much practice or training involved in running around the block, but you can't just get up off the couch after having never run before and expect to run 26 miles.

Have you ever met anyone who *didn't* believe they had a good novel in them? It's rare. But then, how many people do you know who have actually written a novel? If you start and finish a novel—even if it isn't published—you will be in elite company. The information and exercises in this book will increase your chances of effectively starting and finishing your novel. And if you *really* do all the exercises you will be a much better writer by the end of the course than you were when you began it. I *know* this because I've seen the *real* effect this course has had on students.

***Note: Punctuation and grammar are beyond the scope of this course. There are many good books on these subjects as well as a vast array of Internet resources. If you have the opportunity to hire a good editor, he or she will probably catch most of your key punctuation and grammar issues in a 5-10 page sample. Eliminating such issues will make your work read better when you submit a 500 page manuscript. But be careful when hiring an editor. (I will discuss this later in the course.)***

It's a good idea to know why you do anything, especially if you're planning to commit a serious amount of time to it. If your main motivation for writing novels is to make money, don't waste your time with this course. If you don't have a passion for the process of writing you will not be able to surmount the inevitable challenges along the path to success. People can make a living writing for newspapers or magazines. But ask yourself how many novelists you know. Probably none. And if you know any, how many of them make a living writing novels? This is not because people don't want to write novels for a living—that is a dream for many people. If you're not committed to running the creative marathon, then the money will never come.

**EXERCISE:** Write down the reasons WHY you write.

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A friend of mine who took a version of this course read this chapter and told me he didn't have any place he could designate as his workspace. I was incredulous. He had just finished building a small cottage in his backyard and it was unoccupied. I pointed this out to him and he laughed. He set up his writing space in the cottage the next day.

If you don't want to write, you will find any excuse. Most people who take this course don't have an entire room they can dedicate to writing. Therefore, they choose a specific desk or a specific portion of a desk and set up there. If they share the space with others, they let those people know that this area is their writing space and that others should respect that.

Make your writing space pleasant so that you will look forward to working there. Most people have computers in their workspace, but that is not set in stone. If you're doing research on your book, have the research material there. It's always good to have reference books handy as well.

**EXERCISE:** Write down WHERE you will write.

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People usually tell me they don't have any time to write. I always find this amusing. On the one hand, people tell me that writing is their "passion," yet they find more time to watch television than to live their passion.

To be fair, many people really are busy and don't waste a lot of time watching TV. But even if you're really busy, if something is *really* your passion, you find time to do it. I've known people who write on the back of napkins, or while riding home on the bus or subway. If you've *got* to write, no one can stop you. If you devoted thirty minutes a day, five days a week, to writing your novel, you would be done with it by the end of one year. That's two and a half hours a week. If you really wanted to get in shape through exercise, wouldn't you go to the gym three times a week for about an hour, or run/walk/jog for 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

Nothing's going to change unless you want it to change. You bought this course

and there are *proven* tools in it that will help you achieve your goals. If you want to be a better writer, then you must make a commitment of time and focus.

Start small, but with a specific amount of time to which you're willing to commit. Maybe it's just fifteen minutes a day. Don't set your time commitments for seven days. If you do, then even if you write six days a week, you'll think you're failing to keep your commitment. For example, if your goal is two hours a week, then you can accomplish that by doing two one-hour sessions. Or four half-hour sessions. Don't commit to any more than five sessions of any length per week. When you schedule five or fewer sessions per week, if you miss a day, you can always make up for it later in the week.

**EXERCISE:** Write down HOW MUCH TIME you're willing to commit to writing per week.

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Each chapter builds on the previous one, so do the chapters in order. Don't proceed to the next chapter until you've completed **ALL EXERCISES** from the previous chapter.

You can do this. I've seen students in my classes blossom as a result of using the tools discussed in this book. I *know* this course works!

Good luck.