



Embrace a Career Sidestep: Write a novel

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Ever thought about taking a career sidestep to write a novel? Seriously. Issac Asimov was a biochemistry professor before he started to write science fiction (*I, Robot*; *Fantastic Voyage*; and 500 more novels). The astronomer Carl Sagan wrote *Contact*. Michael Crichton was a physician before he became a best-selling author (*Jurassic Park* and *Andromeda Strain*, among others). Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who wrote under the pen name Lewis Carroll, was a mathematician (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). Jennifer McQuiston is a veterinarian and infectious disease researcher at the CDC in Atlanta. She writes historical romance (*The Spinster's Guide to Scandalous Behavior* and others).

The reason I write this post is to encourage other scientists, engineers and professionals to consider a career sidestep because: a) we are a creative bunch, b) we know how to network to achieve results, and c) it is a challenge that differs significantly from science writing. That combination makes a

successful author.

The path to my career sidestep started with a literal misstep in October of 2005. While working as a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) program manager on the second Grand Challenge Autonomous Vehicle race, I broke my leg. It was after the race while on the way back to the hotel; I didn't see a curb. I ended up at home for several months. As a lark, I entered the NANOWRIMO challenge (National Novel Writing Month). NANOWRIMO is a unique annual event that challenges writers and would-be writers to pen 50,000 words for a first draft novel in the month of November. This breaks down to writing a little over 1600 words-per-day. The beauty of this challenge is that it forces writers to meet a serious word deadline. Quickly putting words down on paper is the biggest challenge for writers in any field, including scientists, engineers, and those in scholarly pursuits. Nevertheless, I managed to complete the 50,000-word first draft in November 2005.

Instead of abandoning my novel as folly, I joined several writing guilds dealing with my genre of interest (mystery) and a critique group. Through one of the guilds, I exercised the option to work with a critique partner and was paired with an English major. The advantage of critique groups and partners is that other's eyes are on your WIP (writer-speak for work in progress). Many of these individuals are active authors who understand the craft of writing fiction. My journey as a mystery writer began.

When my work was returned, it was awash with red track changes and comment balloons. Pages and pages were red-lined out. Ouch! As a scientist, I was accustomed to smack downs by peer reviewers. From this red-line experience, however, I learned that I needed to study mystery writing. It was time to put my scientist hat back on! I mean lab coat and do some research. I went to some guild sponsored workshops to learn about the art of writing. Networked with new author friends I met. Tightened up my story. Enhanced my characters to be more likable. Made the bad guy a real eviler. Added some unexpected plot twists and a cohesive story arc. It was through this process that I became a mystery writer.

Would you believe that I put my manuscript away for a decade? Life (career) happened to take a change, and I needed to focus. Kept up participation in my critique group and helped other authors with their WIPs. Reading other newbie authors WIPs is a great way of learning what off-the-mark fiction writing looks like and how it can be improved.

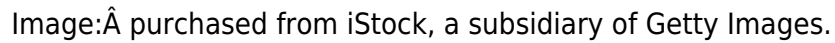
Come 2016, it was time to take the next step in my writing career and become a published author. Since I first started writing in 2005, the publishing landscape had changed dramatically. Many authors, including well-known ones, have moved from traditional publishing to self-publishing. Being an independent author is no longer equal to a vanity author. Amazon.com (Kindle) has a publishing house that allows authors to publish and sell their work through that platform. It means that the author must handle editing, book cover design, and marketing. Self-publishing has gone mainstream. Today, there are even indie writer awards in various genres.

I chose the self-publishing route. In preparation, I utilized online writing tools (hemmingwayapp.com and grammarly.com). These two sites helped with my lack of English grammar skills and improved the readability by highlighting all overly complicated and confusing sentences and deleting unnecessary adverbs. I hired an online book cover designer and content editor. As a writing guild member, I tapped their experience in finding the right editors and designers. To ensure that the final manuscript was ready, I asked a few experts and writer friends to do a final reading. After formatting it for Kindle publication, I did the very last read in the Kindle format to make sure there were no glaring formatting errors and submitted/published my book on Amazon.com.

My book, *Enemy Fire*, is a historical mystery set in 1917 Atlanta. The backdrop is the Great Atlanta

Fire of 1917. 2017 is the 100th anniversary of that devastating event. I use a pen name (Rose Johnson) as a way of separating my writing career and scientific career. Check out my author website: www.rosejohnsonmysteries.com .

If you have ever considered writing a work of fiction, my recommendation is to check out NANOWRIMO. A surprisingly large number of new authors start by accepting the NANOWRIMO challenge. Once you have your manuscript in hand, you can decide if this career sidestep should be your next step into a new, very different, world.

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