

PURE FICTION

Last year, you may remember, I sent my friends a booklet consisting of *Six Short Stories Starring Sprightly Seniors*. In the prologue to the stories, I commented on how much I'd enjoyed writing fiction that year, singling out this key reason:

“The writer of fiction is in complete control of the subject matter. He can introduce or eliminate characters, tell them what to do, put words in their mouth, tinker with the plot, and so on.”

This storytelling control, I noted, was in contrast to how little control I seemed to have in my 80th year over real world stuff (citing a few choice examples), and thus acted as “a welcome counterweight to my inability to call the shots elsewhere.”

Now a year later, I've discovered the need to attach an essential caveat to my insight. I'll come to that – but first, here's how things got to that point.

Awash in octogenarian hubris, I'd set out this year to write a novel, which would be completed by year-end. As Labor Day approached, I had worked out the plot, developed the theme, assembled the characters, probed their primary motivations, set up the various conflicts, and drafted workmanlike versions of the many “scenes”.

But just about then, I found myself bogging down, with my self-imposed year-end deadline creating some uncomfortable pressure. And I came across something attributed to Ken Follett, one of my favorite popular novelists: that he devoted two years to each of his books – the first year to work out the plot, and the second to “write it”. I realized that although all my plot/character/scene devices were in place, I hadn't yet turned my pen to the serious job of writing graphic prose. And that would take a real chunk of time – time I couldn't afford to devote because of other responsibilities I'd undertaken. So I put the novel aside, vowing to return and begin the “writing” next January.

Still, I wanted to send my friends some sort of fiction this December, as I'd been doing in recent years. So I decided to write a

short story – something light and airy that wouldn't take too much time and would enable me to revel in the exercise of “control,” the subject of last year's paean.

It didn't take long before a story idea came into my head. I envisioned it as being based on a combination of that enjoyable Paul Newman/Robert Redford movie, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *The Lavender Hill Mob*, one of Alec Guinness's funniest films.

From Butch came my casting of two best friend outlaws plus one knockout woman. (You remember Etta, who was Sundance's squeeze but had her finest moment with Butch, riding on the handlebars of that turn-of-the-century bicycle, to the lilt of “*Raindrops are Falling on My Head.*”) But in my story, instead of robbing banks in the Gay Nineties, Butch and Sundance would be contemporary con men, preying on naïve folk – primarily oldsters.

That's where *Lavender Hill* came into play featuring a charismatic older woman (played by Marjorie Fielding) who becomes the nemesis of a gang of clumsy robbers attempting a gold bullion heist. The lady in my story – Mrs. L (for Lavender) – would be a wealthy widow whose assets Butch and Sundance have their eyes on.

The initial task – even before developing the characters – was to figure out what sort of scam Butch and Sundance were up to. My first choice dated back to what used to concern us during my days as an M&A lawyer – individuals trading on inside information about major mergers being negotiated before the deal was announced (buying the target's stock prior to the news, then selling at a much higher price after its release). The twist here was that the deals Butch and Sundance selected would already have happened, so they knew the outcome, but Mrs. L didn't.

It was, I soon realized, a terrible choice of scam. The only way for the boys to bilk Mrs. L – after softening her up by providing her with several small gains (which they funded) on deals that did happen – was getting her to put up big money on a deal that the market thought was going to occur (so the price had run up), but then didn't go through (at which point there was a huge sell-off). Ugh! Also, I could never solve the

question of where the tips were coming from? Not from actual insiders, I reasoned, since even Mrs. L might figure that was illegal. I toyed briefly with the idea of the boys telling Mrs. L that Etta had a kind of extra-sensory perception – visions of deals happening before they occurred – not an illegal talent, to be sure, but hardly credible in the real non-e.s.p. world.

It was clear I needed a more ingenious scam. But that, after all, is precisely the kind of control a writer can exercise over his fiction. You don't like one scam? Then make up another.

And so I did. My annual one day outing at Belmont racetrack furnished the inspiration. (I may also have been influenced by that other splendid Newman-Redford pairing in *The Sting*.) Not only was betting on the ponies a far better scam to use on Mrs. L, but it also provided a neat tie-in to her avocation (which the inside info scheme didn't). Just watch.

I have Etta visit the local library one day, where she happens upon a special reading room full of books about horses. A plaque on the wall identifies Mrs. L and her late husband (reported to be rich as Croesus) as the benefactors of the collection, and Butch's quick Google search confirms that Mrs. L is a renowned equine fancier.

So the boys locate her, introduce themselves as fellow horse lovers, and rave about her special room at the library. They learn that she has never bet on the races. Once their friendship is established, they tell her about this man they know (let's call him "Tout") who's an astonishing picker of winning horses. For a small sum that's a mere fraction of the wager, Tout surveys the races each day at various tracks, and then makes a few suggestions to Butch and Sundance. He labels a rare few of his picks as "sure things," with the rest being simply "good bets." They tell Mrs. L that in their experience with Tout, his "sure things" invariably win, while the "good bets," although not a lock, prevail more often than not.

Now Butch and Sundance have Mrs. L interested, and they convince her to risk some small sums of cash on their fictitious Tout's recommendations. They'll place the bets for her, but since Tout's picks

only arrive just before the race is run, there isn't enough time to tell her in advance which horse she's betting on, or even what track or race is involved. Her interest now piqued, Mrs. L decides to go along.

At the end of each day Butch and Sundance examine the results at various tracks in order to select some horses that Tout "recommended" and Mrs. L "bet on." The occasional horse Tout labels "sure thing" wins every time, while the results of the "good bets" vary. But overall, with small amounts involved, Mrs. L is making some money, which the boys are funding out of their own pockets.

Their idea is to gradually raise the stakes involved; to have Mrs. L transfer to them a large sum of money, so they can "bet more readily;" and to continue the emphasis on how strong Tout's "sure thing" picks are. Then one day they'll find an actual horse that had been a pre-race favorite, but – after leading the field for six furlongs – pulled up lame around the final turn and couldn't finish. They would tell Mrs. L that Tout had picked this horse as a "sure thing," so they bet all of her money on him and would have won but for the tragic injury. "Sorry, Mrs. L, but that's horse racing," they'd say – and then beat it out of town fast.

Okay, so now I had my set-up – but what was the plot? Where's the conflict? Well, I reckoned, somehow or other Mrs. L has to figure out she's being duped. But does she realize this by herself – turning out not to be the ditz the boys thought she was, but instead pretty savvy? Or does a friend – perhaps an aged-but-worldly colleague – set her straight? And does the eye-opening occur before or after she "loses" all her money? And most critical, what does she do about it when she finds out? There were still a lot of issues to explore, but I wasn't worried – after all, each of these was well within my creative control.

Meanwhile, I needed to work out the Butch/Sundance/Etta personae and relationships. I considered making Sundance completely amoral – a disciple of Willie Sutton (who said he robbed banks because "that's where the money is"), Sundance robs rich widows because they're the ones with the cash. But he's very sloppy on details, so he needs the more organized Butch to handle the particulars. I think they should have a real conflict down the road – perhaps Sundance being intent on stealing all of Mrs. L's money, while Butch wants to quit the

scheme early and leave her with at least something. Is Butch less amoral than Sundance and growing soft on Mrs. L, or is it just that he suspects she may be catching on to the con? Maybe a little of each

Then there's the whole question of Etta. What's a nice girl doing in the midst of all this craziness? Well, when she first meets Sundance – attracted by his boldness and good looks – she doesn't know he's a crook. Then she's lured into participating in one of his schemes – at which point he tells her that she's an aider and abettor and can't get out of their conspiracy even if she wants to.

But that's the real question – does she want to? Is she smart or dumb? Cunning? Does she take an active role in scamming Mrs. L – and if so, how does she feel about it? Or does she experience some pangs and confess to Mrs. L what the boys are up to. (“But you can't tell Sundance I squealed, Mrs. L, or he'll knock me off.”) Clearly, I had some appetizing stuff to play with here.

As for romance, I played with Butch being jealous of Etta's attachment to Sundance – but does he act on it? Cuckolding his best friend? She fancies Butch, too – is she tempted? Maybe, but she fears Sundance's vengeance were he to find out. I envisioned delicious scenes of Butch and Etta separately mulling their choices in rich monologues. So many possibilities

Still, I kept coming back to the story line's crucial element – what does Mrs. L do when she discovers she's being scammed? I went through a number of permutations, but in each case was dissatisfied with the results. The more feasible ones were too prosaic, the ones with greater zest less likely to be accomplished.

Take, for example, one of my early ideas. The boys plead with Mrs. L not to turn them in to the cops. In return, they agree to work off the debt by serving Mrs. L for a year as chauffer (Sundance), cook (Etta), and bookkeeper (Butch). Nah, I realized, it's plausible but too ho-hum.

At the other extreme, my final idea at least had a little zest to it. Mrs. L discovers what the boys are up to before they've stripped all her funds. With some help from her aged-but-worldly friend, Mrs. L decides

to teach the scammers a lesson. She finds a long shot that has just won its race at a track in a later time zone, wires the boys to bet a bundle of her money on that horse, and then demands the winnings from them. But for this ruse to work, Butch and Sundance have to be unaware of the time zone difference, which seems unlikely.

I didn't want to give up on the story, though – especially since I was still in control of all its disparate elements. I just needed the plot twist to be more unpredictable Then it hit me one day. Hey, how about having Mrs. L – seemingly naïve and sweet but actually savvy and not-so-sweet – uncover the scam by herself early on and confront the boys with this pitch: “You guys are doing it all wrong. Take me into your gang for a one-third interest, and I'll show you how to pull these things off – plus I can steer your way a number of my well-heeled widow friends.” This presented some intriguing possibilities, to be sure, but I couldn't figure out how to end it – and, truth be told, I was dubious about casting my sweet old lady as a crook.

Well, it was at this point of seeming impasse that I got my final inspiration – forget the story, Jim, don't trouble your little head trying to work out all those knotty details, and instead *write this piece about the process!*

All of which brings me back to that “control” element I noted in the first paragraph, and the new caveat I've now attached. Sure, as a writer of fiction you do have control: I could make Mrs. L sweet or cynical and switch from inside info to the betting ploy; Butch and Sundance might remain good buddies throughout or end up at each other's throats; Etta could decide (at her peril) to switch from Sundance to Butch – whatever. But with all that control, I couldn't seem to make the damn thing work.

And what I came to realize was that before you start tinkering with the moving parts, you need a good story as your foundation – a story with a sturdy premise, a point to make, perhaps even an overriding theme – and in this case, I just didn't have one.

Anyway, your assignment here is to pass along any thoughts as to how some day I might resuscitate this tale of woe.

