

My Third First Novel

by Con Chapman

This is a big day for me, as my third first novel—*Making Partner*—will be released today. It started out in life as my first first novel, but I sort of shanked it into the rough. Everybody's entitled to a mulligan, aren't they?

Back in 2001 I was *thisclose* to getting my first first novel published by a major west coast house. They were all set to sign on the dotted line (which, as anybody who's signed anything lately knows, isn't dotted) when tragedy struck.

September 11, 2001. In addition to the loss of life and property and numerous inconveniences to our daily routines that followed, such as full-body cavity searches at airports, another tragic consequence of “9/11” was that the bottom dropped out of the market for first novels.



“Lizzie Borden took an axe, gave her mother 40 whacks.”

You could almost feel the angst among budding novelists as you surveyed postings on writers' sites: “My historical romance based on Lizzie Borden still ‘on hold’ according to agent. Publishers want books on something called ‘Islam’—what's that?”

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/con-chapman/my-third-first-novel>»

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My novel languished for so long that I eventually self-published by print-on-demand. I'd like to say that first book was a friends and family affair, except that my cousin Mary Beth's check bounced.

Second first novel

But I didn't give up, no sir. I went on to write a second first novel, this time through a publisher. I considered *that* one my first novel, and not just because my first first novel was such an embarrassment. You see, one of the publishing industry's dirty little secrets is that first novels sell much better than second novels. So why not enhance your chances for success by calling your second novel your first?

A successful first novel is no guaranty of success, sort of like the so-called "sophomore jinx" that afflicts rookie baseball phenoms. The odds that a first novel will be either a literary or a financial success are long enough, you'd think if you made it over one or both of those two hurdles you'd have a clear sprint to the finish line.

Don Taussig: Jewish victim of sophomore jinx.

But no; nothing inspires the disdain (and unspoken envy) of critics like the success of a first novel; they love to look down their noses at second ones, and note in sorrow that you have failed to live up to your early promise. Then they all go down to the White Horse Tavern like an office softball team, buy a pitcher of Bud Light and celebrate their success in crushing your soul.

But I saw through their little game. The trick is to keep cranking out first novels—don't fall for the old "I look forward to the fulfillment of his talent" crap. Stay—to paraphrase Bob Dylan—Forever the First Novelist. Once you get started, there's no reason why you can't write a second, third, even a fourth first novel.

To write my third first novel, I could have cut corners and just gone back to my second first novel, but I think more of my readers than that! Nope, I went back to the roots, all the way back to my first first novel, *A View of the Charles*. I wasn't about to write *original* stuff for a third first novel. You think I'm going to sit at a

desk for two years cranking out new material just to satisfy people who read my blog every day for free *and never click through the banner ads?* No way! So I re-wrote my first first novel, but this time somebody actually edited it, so the pages you'd flip through to get to the good stuff are gone.

First first novel

At my publisher's suggestion (read: demand), I cut out 100 pages of semi-autobiographical detail. "This violates one of Somerset Maugham's three unwritten rules of novel-writing," he said. "Which is?" I asked. "Nobody want to read about your stupid boring life." So you can look upon my third first novel as a consumer product like Tide laundry detergent with a "New, Improved!" label on it.

The book has a different title than the first time around to distance it from the stench of failure. It also has an illustration, an extra that pretenders to high-brow literature such as John Updike and Alain Robbe-Grillet never got in *their* novels. No, to find an illustrated novel you've got to hang out with the immortals, the true giants of literature: Mark Twain, Miguel de Cervantes, Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens. Believe me, Joyce Carol Oates couldn't change their typewriter ribbons.



About as good as he got.

My first first novel was illustrated by my son, but he didn't make the cut for my third first novel. I mean, he's a great kid, we love him like he's family—which he is—but he never progressed beyond the

little pencil man at summer cartooning camp. So as brutal as it may seem I had to tell him I'd decided in football coach-speak to "go in a different direction." The art work for my third first novel was drawn by Sage Stossel of *The Atlantic* and *The Boston Globe*, who did the cover for my second first novel, in case you're keeping score at home.

So I've done everything I can to make my third first novel a success. Now it's *your* turn. In the spirit of James Michael Curley, the crooked mayor of Boston who encouraged his supporters to vote early and often, it's time for you to stock up and buy multiple copies of *Making Partner*, for the following reasons:

1. You need one for the kitchen and one for the bath—just like Princess telephones!



2. You never know when friends are going to drop in.

3. Of course, there are altruistic reasons why you might want to buy a copy. Think of the poor people of Freedonia, who live in poorly insulated *splotchkies*, the mud and fennel huts their ancestors developed shortly after they discovered how to make beer. A 300-page paperback can be slipped into cracks in the walls of these primitive dwellings and will expand when it rains to form a porous, inefficient seal. DIY Tip: Don't try this with the Kindle edition.

I'm also offering valuable prizes, the way comic books did when I was a boy. If you buy a copy of *Making Partner* I will personally come to your house and perform the dirtiest chore you've got! Put me to work! Cleaning the oven—no problem. Gutters and

downspouts—lemme at ‘em! [Winner is responsible for airfare and first-class lodging of author. Some restrictions and blackout periods apply. Offer void in states I don't feel like going to.]

For those of you who bought a copy of my first first novel, you're probably feeling a bit . . . well, miffed right now. You think it's unfair and deceptive—not to mention arbitrary and capricious—that you paid twenty bucks for something that's now obsolete, having been replaced by a third first novel.

I feel your pain. And to make it better, I'm offering people like you a 100% cash refund, no questions asked. Just tear off the front cover of the book and send it to me, and your check will be in the mail the same day.

How can I make this incredible offer? Well, I figure my downside is minimal.

I mean, I only sold like—what—two copies?

