



Peter E. Fenton is a Canadian author and playwright. His first book, *The Woodcarver's Model* came out in April of 2022 and was a four time nominee in the *Goodreads M/M Romance Readers' Choice Awards*.

His second book *Mann Hunt* was released in August of 2023 and was also a nominee in the *Goodreads M/M Romance Readers' Choice Awards*. *Mann Hunt* is the first in the three part *Declan Hunt Mysteries series*, with his most recent release, *Hoodoo House* continuing the story. The final installment in the series will come out in the summer of 2025, (all through *Pride Publishing*).

Peter's most recent release is the teen romance novel *Not Not Normal* put out by *Lorimer Publishing* which aims to normalize gay teen relationships in a high school setting.

All of his novels feature gay central characters, are proudly set in Canada and are filled with humour and heart.

Previous creative work was focused on writing for the stage, including award-winning productions of *The Giant's Garden*, *Newfoundland Mary*, and *Bemused* which have

played across Canada. His newest play, *The Detective Disappears* recently finished a six week tour.

Peter spent many years working in palaeontology in remote locations including the Canadian Rockies, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

He currently lives in Toronto, Canada with his partner of more than twenty years.

To find out more about Peter E. Fenton go to <https://peterefenton.ca/>

1. What is your approach to writing a novel: that is, do you outline or not?

I am terrible at outlining, so the answer would be...NOT. When I begin each novel, I know who the main characters are and I have a sense of the story I want to tell. Then I let my characters go on their merry way and they wander where they will in my mind and the plot unfolds accordingly. For me, good storytelling comes from detailed characters with strong needs. I focus on what they want, what stands in their way, how they overcome those obstacles, and how their actions change what they do next. And as I introduce new characters, the story goes in unexpected directions. Sometimes I write myself into a corner and have to retrace my steps and rewrite BUT, by not planning every step from the beginning I often get a more interesting plot. It may not be the most efficient way to write, but ultimately my characters get to go on a bigger journey and so does the reader.

2. Do you keep files and piles of notes?

I make tons of notes as I go, most of which I never get back to. They are a chaotic mess and sit there, on the pages of my note book wondering why they were written in the first place. The odd one, however, will prove fruitful and become part of the novel. And I am trying to get better at note keeping, especially since writing on *The Declan Hunt Mysteries* series which requires some continuity.

3. What is it that kick starts a project for you: a character, a situation, or...?

Character, always. Sometimes even before I know what kind of book I want to write, I have a character in mind, a relationship and something the character wants. I live with the characters in my head as I write and they grow, like real people. And sometimes they occupy more space in my mind than I intend, and they demand more attention in a book. One secondary character in my novel *Hoodoo House*, a 13 year old boy named Henry, almost took over the book. Since this was the second book in my mystery series and the series already had two other main characters with an arc that was carried over from the

previous novel, *Hoodoo House* couldn't be focused on Henry. A number of readers want Henry to have his own book. Who knows if I will ever write that book? But if I did decide to write that book, I would already know a lot about that character and what he wants now.

What started you in writing?

In the early 1990s a good friend was in the acting company of an out-of-town theatre festival. This was, of course, before the age of emails, so we used to write letters. When the happenings in my life were too mundane to write about, I began to send my friend letters from an imaginary character I created to amuse him. The letters were from a young woman to her beloved brother and described the strange life she led as a ticket seller for a small northern Ontario railway in 1912. Her name was Dorcus Fleeing. After a few months of writing the "Dorcus Fleeing" letters, I visited him and he took me to a cabaret night at one of the theatres. Unbeknownst to me, he had planned to read the letters to the audience. The audience response to the writing was amazing (helped by his great theatrical reading), and I was hooked on the idea of writing for an audience.

What kept you going?

Frankly, I found writing addictive. Creating people, and the worlds they live in seemed to be the one thing I had complete control over in my life. Over the next thirty years my writing went from letters, to writing plays, then musicals and musical comedy. Most of my work for stage was written with my life partner, Scott White. And now I've moved onward to novels.

4. Can you tell us a bit about the first story you had published -- how did that come about?

I started writing novels when COVID shelved three theatre projects we had been working on. I had a desire to write *something*, so I decided to tackle a novel which could be consumed by readers in the safety of their own homes. The novel was picked up by the *Pride* imprint of what was then *Totally Entwined Publishers* out of Britain. *The Woodcarver's Model* is the story of adventure travel writer Rob Hansen who takes a break from writing about his travels to dangerous corners of the world and accepts a commission to write an article about a tiny island which lies in the waters between the mainland of British Columbia and Vancouver island on the west coast of Canada. During his assignment, he discovers Mitchell, a man he once knew from an earlier time in his life, which sparks a romance. Rob soon discovers that life on the peaceful island isn't idyllic as it first seemed.

And how do you feel about it now?

When I first decided to write a novel, I wrote what I, as a gay man, wanted to read. I have never been interested in erotica, but I am interested in stories with gay central characters. I was totally unaware that the vast majority (80+%) of the readers of male/male romance were straight females. I also had never read much in the way of romances. My taste in reading veered in a different direction. I wrote more from instinct than from a place of knowledge about the world of romance writing. *The Woodcarver's Model* is by no means a standard M/M romance when compared to much of what is out there, but I'm still quite proud of it and continue to write in my own style. For me the romance is only one element of the book. I like stories where there is a plot that is greater than just a character wanting to find a partner.

5. How have you grown as a writer?

My editor has really helped me develop better writing habits. And after publishing my first novel, I became more involved in the larger world of M/M romance (and finally started reading other authors in the genre). This helped me better understand the world that my books were being marketed in. This doesn't mean I write faster, and I still don't adhere to strict tropes. I write the stories I want to write, as I don't write to a particular market. But I think my core skills have improved in terms of being more aware of the technical craft of writing thanks to the skill of my editor's comments.

6. What are the three most important pieces of advice you'd give to writers?

- Write about what you love, it will show in the end result.
- Spend time to develop good three-dimensional characters with all of their quirks and flaws, loves, hates and fears. Characters are what readers fall in love with, root for, or want to see hit by a car.
- Use a professional editor. As a writer you can only catch so many mistakes on your own. And remember, editors are a writer's, and a reader's best friend.

7. How long does it generally take you to complete a novel – from conception to completion?

I like to spend a year on a novel. This is likely due to the fact that I don't outline and I like to give the novel time to grow and evolve. It gives me the opportunity to mull over issues that crop up. It also gives me time to have a life outside of the writing room. I'm a firm believer in having a balanced life. On top of that, of course is the marketing of the book. Social media (a necessary component of marketing) can take up quite a bit of time.

How many revisions do you normally go through when writing a novel?

My first draft exists to get the rough ideas down on paper. It's where the plot and characters are born, yet the novel is usually not fully developed. This is the draft that I pass on to my partner Scott who is, among many things, my story editor. Having lived and worked with him for nearly a quarter of a century, I trust him, his organizational skills, and his ability to hone in on pacing and story structure.

Once I have a draft I am happy with, then the book goes to the publisher for their comments and there are three rounds of editing with the editorial team, which usually don't involve major changes in plot, but do involve corrections not just to grammar, but clarification on dialogue tags, slips in point of view or instances where I have put in too much filtering. My editor is also good at ensuring that the past and present tenses are consistent.

In the case of my latest book ***Not Not Normal*** the gay teen romance, there was a teen editorial team who read the material to ensure the book accurately reflected school life, as well as two editors and the publisher himself giving notes. There was a request to fix the day of the school year the book started on which had to be changed from a Monday to a Tuesday to accommodate the school calendar in Toronto. This had a ripple effect that took a surprisingly large amount of reworking, as the main character's course schedule and the events happening on a particular day of school played a role in the plot.

8. What's the most difficult stage in the writing for you?

Each stage has its challenges. The part I like best is creating the work. The part I like least is re-plotting after the first draft and ensuring it all still makes sense.

9. Who are the authors that you admire most, who inspire you, whose writing do you think is most beautiful, moving, exciting?

The books I read are not specifically books by, or about, gay people. In a way, I prefer to read outside the genre as my relaxation away from what I am creating at the desk. Much of what I read in the M/M genre are books by authors I have friended in the last few years and it would be unfair to pick favourites as they all have virtues and areas they excel at in their writing. So in work outside the field, my favourite authors are definitely genre-specific. In crime fiction (which I love) Ian Rankin is high on my list. My true love is YA fiction. This is what I turn to for escape. Catherine Gilbert Murdock's ***The Book of Boy*** is beautiful, and filled with surprises. Kate DiCamillo's ***The Magician's Elephant*** is absolutely brilliant, and the way Lauren Wolk treats her young characters as real, fully rounded people with real wants and desires moves me. Emma Donoghue's ***Pull of the Stars*** is fantastic literary writing. My tastes are eclectic.

10. Are there authors who you think are much better at spinning a plot as opposed to writing beautiful prose? What do you find most satisfying in another author's book: a great plot, beautiful writing, fully realized characters?

I am always drawn to character. If I attach myself to a character (either by loving or hating them) I will follow them on whatever journey the writer lays out for them. If I can't connect to them, I can't invest in the plot. On a classic level, I suppose that Charles Dickens is one of the masters not only of character names, but fantastic descriptions that incorporate each character's nature, or their desires. I have a strong love for Dickens.

11. In your own work, what do you think you are strongest at: plot, beautiful prose, character? Or something else?

That's an easy one. Character. I know I've written one well when I fall in love with them, or hate them to the core. I am a less prosaic writer than many, but I have been told that the rhythm of my dialogue works well for my characters. Perhaps that relates to my experience writing plays.

12. How do you plot a mystery or a thriller – what stymies you most, what do you find easiest?

I start with the characters and an idea of the style of crime being committed. Then I let the characters reveal their hidden intentions and motives to me over time through the writing process. I love *free writing* from the point of view of my characters and sometimes, characters I created will surprise me with a twist that I didn't see coming. As a result, when I start, I am not always settled on who committed the crime until well into the process. My works ramble in many directions before I make the choices that will result in the final novel. My mysteries are always written from multiple points of view. This allows times where the reader knows more than the person investigating the crime and that can be very interesting. Of course this style of writing can have its perils.

My favourite story about the way I work relates to *Mann Hunt*, book one of *The Declan Hunt Mysteries*. Scott had finished reading the first draft and had made copious notes. I came through the door and he said he thought I should sit down. He had something about the book he wanted to talk to me about. Then he informed me that while he greatly enjoyed the book, he thought I had the wrong killer. He understood the direction I had taken, but he asked me why that person had become the villain and what it achieved and what other possibilities I had considered.

We talked it over, and sure enough, there was a crossroads in the path I had come to and gone a particular direction and made a choice. His input confirmed a niggling feeling I had that while this road created a good story, the other solution would have a greater impact and was better earned based on the way the first part of the book set up the case.

The next draft involved rewriting the last third of the book and checking through the first two thirds to ensure that the clues were appropriately laid, but in the end, I was much happier with the result.

13. What advice can you give on plotting a mystery?

Procedural dramas on TV always focus on a crime, a series of suspects and then each of the characters have to have means, motive and opportunity. As a rudimentary starting point for writing a mystery, this is one way to start to flesh out a mystery story. So I suppose you could make a chart and work backwards, knowing who did it and then find an origin point and plant clues and red herrings, but that just isn't the way my writing brain works.

The secret to a good mystery novel is to reveal the right information at the right time to keep the reader interested.

Ultimately even if a reader has guessed who committed the crime by the second page, they will usually continue reading to the end to see if they were right. And sometimes they were right (which makes the reader feel good about their sleuthing abilities) and sometimes they are wrong (which makes them feel like the mystery had them fooled and they enjoyed the journey). The important thing for me is to ensure that the crime IS solvable. Clues have to be in place so that if the reader were to go back through the book a second time, everything was in place to come to the correct conclusion.

14. Does the world you create in your non-series novels continue to live in your mind long after you've completed the novel? What implication does that have in terms of wanting to do a series in the same setting?

I have written two stand-alone books and I love the worlds I have created, especially Marsh Island in *The Woodcarver's Model*. In a way the island was a central character. Readers commented on how fully realized it was, and how they wanted to visit this fictional place (though it is an amalgam of places I have been). I was tempted to build a relationship between the lead characters in *The Declan Hunt Mysteries* and one of the secondary characters in *The Woodcarver's Model*, but it just didn't happen.

My books, series and standalone, all take place in Canada. I want to give readers who haven't been here a taste of the great variety of environments this country offers so I try to set my stories in different places within the country.

15. If you have a series: When doing a series, how “into” the world of that series do you get?

Working through a series requires a strong handle on the world. I am lucky because while I am terrible at keeping notes, my partner Scott is good at keeping those notes in orderly files and when I have a question, he can often pinpoint where the answer can be found. It’s definitely easier for me writing in contemporary fiction, as opposed to fantasy or science fiction. Even so, I must understand the rules that control the world I’ve created and must be careful not to change those rules (unless those changes are planned and are critical to the plot.) For the story to be believable and for the sake of the reader, the world I create must clearly lay out the people, places and rules by which they live.

In *The Declan Hunt Mysteries*, each book takes place in and around Calgary, Alberta. The first book, *Mann Hunt*, doesn’t venture beyond the boundaries of the city. I have used real neighbourhoods and streets, although actual buildings and business are fictional. In later books in the series, the action moves out of the city proper and into bordering regions: *Hoodoo House* takes place in the prairies to the east, and book three (as yet unnamed) takes place, in part, in the mountain townsites of Banff and Jasper. There are still references to Calgary and places mentioned in *Mann Hunt* (and care has been taken not to repeat too much information from previous books, which would be tiresome for readers who remember them from the earlier books). At the same time I have to make sure that the “facts” about places in earlier books agree with what I’ve said in newer stories.

Things that are essential are knowing every detail about a character (I have character files), consistent details about locations that are used again such as the office of the detective (I have floor plans), geography that recurs (street names and times it takes to drive from the office to a given location). I have files and files that one day I will organize effectively. I am in the process of doing a proper series bible, but up until now, I’ve turned to Scott and said, “Do I have a file that has a character list?” and magically he can usually find it somewhere in my various notes and bring it up so I can refer to it.

16. Do you constantly think about that world and compare it to reality, changing it or fixing it as you go along?

My books so far have all been set in reality. (I have a sketch for a new book which is a fantasy/reality crossover, so I will have to face that when the time comes.)

1) What scares you about doing a series?

I wouldn’t use the word “scare”. “Concerns” is a better word for me here. My primary “concern” is to keep each book in the series “fresh”. The readers have already met and know the main characters. Finding out about them in the first book is part of the fun for the readers so, in future books I

rely on new characters to create new challenges in terms of either the mystery or the central relationship. Also, because I write mysteries, I have a new case for the main characters (and reader) to solve in each book. And, as my series has a romantic angle to it, we also follow the relationship between the main characters and that relationship evolves through the series. I want to ensure that each case is different enough that it doesn't form a pattern. But I also want to ensure that the core characters are continuing on a longer continuous arc that makes the reader want to continue on their journey.

2) What are the advantages/disadvantages of series characters?

One advantage to characters who appear throughout a series is, if you're lucky and have written them well, readers are invested in them. They want to know what happens to them. They are interested in how those characters change and grow in each book as a result of their experiences. So I can explore a longer arc with my characters.

As for disadvantages, it is important to keep finding new depths to explore, but that is what I LOVE most about writing and my characters are complex, flawed and what they want and need changes as they evolve. So if a series character isn't well developed, you can run out of things to explore pretty quickly. The problem with my characters in *The Declan Hunt Mysteries* is that they keep evolving so much that the present series MAY have to extend to a fourth book to get the series to a place where I can leave the readers in a good place. Time will tell. I'm still in mid-process on the third book, but it is getting longer than I thought and there is still a lot of personal things the characters need to deal with.

3) If you do not have a series (in publication or planning) would you like to? If so, why? If not, why not?

N/A

17. What other kinds of writing do you do?

For years I had written for the stage. I've been lucky to have a number of my plays, musicals and musical comedies produced across Canada and into the U.S.A. More importantly, they were professionally produced with someone else's money, so I knew that someone believed in my work.

And there is a vast difference between writing scripts and novels. Scripts are dialogue based. Stage and acting directions (unless absolutely vital to the story or plot) are sometimes totally ignored. What you see on stage is a team effort with your creation being filtered through the talents of the director, actors and design team so the end result grows from just the printed word on the page into a production. The script is the

skeleton. The production is the flesh and muscle that is built on your words. Sometimes that is a good thing and sometimes it can all go terribly awry.

With a novel, once the words are on the page, the text is set. The “production” element is the process of cover art, and type-setting the book. The end result is much more in the control of the author. Now that I’ve written on books, I must admit that I kind of like having greater control.

18. What tips do you have for beginning writers?

Read everything you can and if you find an author you like, read whatever they’ve written. Don’t do it to copy them and their style. Do it to be inspired.

Don’t be afraid to put your work out there. Some people will like it, others will not. Both will comment on it (if you’re lucky). If you are stung by a bad review, look up your favourite book online and read that book’s worst reviews and you will discover how subjective criticism can be. Sometimes criticism is ridiculous. I once read a review that hated a book because of the font. Every author has their detractors. That doesn’t mean the work is bad. It means it isn’t to the taste of the person doing the review.

Your editor is your best friend, in spite of them asking you to change your favourite line in your book. A good editor wants you to become a better writer. Learn from each and every comment they make. If you want to fight for a particular idea, be able to articulate to your editor WHY.

Don’t let your writer’s ego control the length of a story. Every story idea has its own length and it should only be as long as it has to be. To tell a story in too few words will cheat it. To stretch it out because *you* want it to be more “important” will only detract from the overall impact. I refer to my creations as my children. Be a good parent and let the stories grow into what they are meant to be.

19. What about readers – how have they received your books – do you hear from them, have any problems arisen, or any good/funny/touching experiences happened with regard to readers?

For the most part readers that have contacted me, or reviewed my books, have enjoyed them. With *The Declan Hunt Mysteries* series I’ve had more than one say that they bought the book thinking it was a standard romance and were pleasantly surprised because they had forgotten how much they loved a good mystery.

I find that some readers find my use of multiple points of view a challenge. For me, the use of multiple POVs is important in a mystery because the reader can see the action from the POV of the unidentified killer while the main character is unaware of it, which is what we see in films and TV. I do make it clear from the first line of a chapter or scene

just who's POV it is written in, but in my mysteries I don't do chapter headings other than the chapter number.

Gay male readers have responded to the fact that the books seem honestly written from a gay male perspective.

And with my teen romance novel, ***Not Not Normal***, there has been a strong response (mostly from adults) of how validating it was to read about an experience of feeling like an outsider and the path to finding some level of acceptance. That has been very gratifying. And youth readers seem happy to see LGBTQ+ representation available to them in a novel in a way that hasn't been accessible to them in the past.

20. What kind of fan mail do you get?

I have received a good number of social media messages and notes through my website that have let me know that my writing is making a difference, or is at least entertaining the readers. Much of what the readers think comes back, not in the form of personal communication, but as reviews. Both of these are always appreciated. It reminds me that I'm not alone.

21. Have you developed any friendships with fans over the years? What do your fans most like about your books?

I would say that the readers of my books primarily connect with me through messages on the internet. I can say that I really enjoy connecting with readers at the conferences. It is nice to hear that my books are often considered a way for them to escape from their daily lives and take their mind off their woes.

I have had increasing levels of contact with other authors and a few of those I encounter on occasion in a social setting. My novels have only been out for a few years so the fan base is slowly growing.

Will any of those super fans grow into friends? Only time will tell.

22. Is the publication of each book as thrilling as that first one?

It certainly is. Each is a triumph. Each book holds the promise that my creation will be read by others and, in doing so, my characters come to life as the books are read.

23. What are your goals as a writer?

My primary goal is to have fun, and entertain others. When that ceases it will be time to move on to something new. I am fortunate as I am retired from my full time job and have a pension (and partner) which supports most of my bills. Writing is definitely more than a hobby, but I don't rely on it to make a living which frees me to work at my own pace. Ultimately I would love to have *The Declan Hunt Mysteries* turned into a TV series.

24. Why do you think mystery is so popular?

Solving a mystery is a type of game or puzzle. Good mysteries leave clues that allow the mystery to be honestly solved by an attentive reader. There is something gratifying about coming to the end of a novel and discovering if you were right or not.

25. Why do you think same-sex plots have spawned so many sub-genres, like mermen or shape shifting, for example?

Perhaps same-sex relationships were always sort of considered on the fringe and now those relationships can extend into fringe elements of fantasy. As a person who writes in mainstream genres, I am amazed at the inventiveness of some of the shape shifting. To me it is an evolution. Vampires have long been sexualized and same sex relationship are a strong part of the gothic world so elegantly brought to life through the writings of creators like Anne Rice. So it only makes sense that the possibilities for romance could extend into other fantasy genres that are only limited by our imagination. I also like the fact that in some cases there is a great deal of humour involved in these novels such as a recent novel I saw that was a romance between a man and a cheese shifter (yes you read that right).

26. Talk about your most recent book and what it means to you.

My latest book is the gay teen romance *Not Not Normal*. It was commissioned by *Lorimer Publishing* as part of their *Real Love* series intended to normalize gay relationships for teen-aged readers. This is probably my most personal book, as it has a lot of my experiences growing up as a gay teen. I am humbled by the positive response and thrilled that this book is marketed through school catalogues. I am hopeful that it will allow a lot of young readers to feel more comfortable, to find their true friends, and to find the strength to honour their true self.

What sparked the idea? How long had you had this idea before starting to write?

Although I hadn't planned on writing a youth novel, I knew what the story would be from the moment I agreed. The story would be about a 16-year-old high school outcast. In the book, the central character Jordan suffers from bullying, anxiety disorders and panic attacks. I drew heavily on my own life experiences. This is not a "coming out" book. This is a book that shows that regardless of if you are gay or straight, we all have similar life challenges. Sometimes those challenges are magnified by dealing with societal roadblocks connected to being gay. And in this case the book is about finding another boy who understands the central character and accepts Jordan for who he is, and helps him to become the person he has always wanted to be. It is also about a love of books and reading. These are all things that were in the background as I started writing this book.

Did you feel compelled to write this book? About this subject?

Yes. Once I had the idea, I **needed** to write it. I felt that it just might help someone out there and give them the hope that sharing their fears and hopes with another person of the same sex and establishing a relationship could have a positive outcome. When I was growing up, being open about your sexuality had dangerous implications.

How did you approach the planning and writing? Did you prepare an outline? Would you share your outlining and preparation processes?

I just wrote this one out. No outline. Because it was so personal, it flowed on its own. That's not to say that the first draft was what was submitted to the publisher. I went to a teacher friend of mine to check over details of high school in 2024, and how bullies were reprimanded now. Since I was writing about things that I was not currently experiencing personally (for me that meant in this day and age) it was important to consult with someone who knew. And there was a teen editing panel and the publisher to guide the process so that the resulting novel met their needs. *Lorimer Publishing* has strict parameters for these books. They need to be around 25 000 words, must be written at a grade 5-8 reader level (known as hi-lo writing for reluctant readers) and the book had to focus on a story which realistically portrayed young gay or non-binary characters developing a relationship which had a positive outcome.

How long did it take to complete it?

Not Not Normal took five months from start to submission draft. From that point it passed through a youth editorial team, then several professional editors as well the publisher, each making comments, many requiring changes.

What was your least favorite part in the writing of the book?

The writing was a joy. With this book the least pleasant part was defending some editorial requests that I felt would have negatively impacted the story.

What do you like best about it?

Experiencing the reaction of the release party attendees was incredible. Many of the fifty people there had only had exposure to my theatre writing; some were only familiar with my adult mystery books. This was a side of me that was new to them, and they were surprised.

The book itself has been getting a very positive response. A number of the adult readers have told me that they'd wished that a story like this had been around when they were young. It would have helped them feel like they were not alone. That is the goal for the youth readers.

Which are your favorite characters and why?

The main character, Jordan, is a particular favourite, but that is because the character feels true to me, because ... it is me.

Nathan, the troubled teen Jordan meets at school, is just so independent and he doesn't tolerate injustice. I love people like that – people who are out to make a difference and save the world.

The other character I adore is the school janitor (who bears the name of an old friend of mine). He's the only adult the kids feel that they can go to with problems, and he's willing to fight for them.

Which are your favorite moments in the story?

I can think of two. The first is an innocent romantic encounter that Jordan has in a field of tall grass. It is based on an encounter I had with someone I was deeply in love with in my early years.

The second is near the end of the book when Jordan finds the courage to overcome his fears, but to find out what happens you have to read the book. No spoilers.