

**B**est-selling mystery/suspense writer Ridley Pearson says that writing is like golf: “It’s never perfect or where you want it,

but you love the process.” ■ Pearson—who in the early 1990s became the first U.S. author to receive an Oxford University Raymond Chandler Fulbright Fellowship in Detective Fiction—says that being a fiction author is also like being an actor, only better, because he gets to intellectually and emotionally take on several roles: detective, criminal, even femme fatale.

But Pearson’s books don’t spring only from imagination and observation. The writer is known for his comprehensive outlines, extensive research, impressive forensic detail, interest in high-tech crimes and penchant for revising. “Books aren’t written; they are rewritten,” he says.

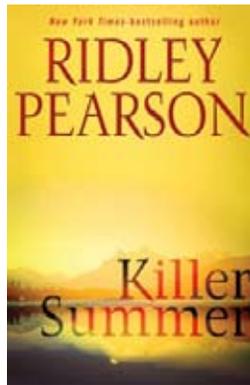
*Undercurrents*, the first book in his popular series about Seattle police detective Lou Boldt, helped solve an actual murder case. In the 1988 novel, the time a body entered the water is determined in part by expert knowledge of tidal flows. A prosecuting attorney and crime-fiction fan in Skagit County, Washington, north of Seattle, was reading the novel, saw a local oceanographer’s name in the credits, and called on the scientist as an expert witness in a case involving a woman whose body had been found in Puget Sound’s Bowman Bay. Based on tidal currents, the oceanographer was able to pinpoint the time the woman had been thrown off a bridge by her husband, disproving the husband’s account of her disappearance. The husband was convicted of murder and sentenced to around 20 years in prison.

Pearson, who lives part of the year in the Ketchum–Sun Valley, Idaho, area and has set his Sheriff Walt Fleming series there, considers locale an integral part of his mysteries. For instance, his deep affection for Idaho’s Bald Mountain, Sun Valley Lodge and Big Wood River motivated him to begin the Sheriff Fleming series four years ago, he says. The beautiful, rugged Sun Valley region is surrounded by spectacular backcountry that Sheriff Fleming prizes, but that adds to the challenge of finding and capturing criminals. Raging rivers, avalanches and blizzards can add excitement, too, and the area attracts the rich and famous from

across the globe, which can create tension between the affluent and the working class.

“If what you’ve written could happen just anywhere, you’re doing something wrong,” Pearson says.

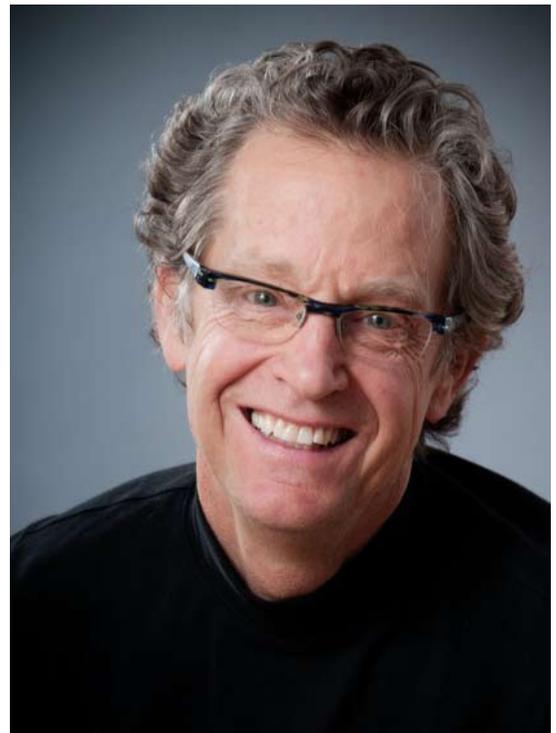
The Northwest is home to numerous best-selling mystery writers who find the region conducive to creativity. For instance, Elizabeth George—whose Inspector Lynley series was adapted and aired by the BBC for seven years, and also shown in the United States as part of PBS’ *Mystery!* series—lives on Whidbey Island, northwest of Seattle, while former defense attorney Phillip Margolin—a Portland resident whose *The Last Innocent Man* (1981) became an HBO movie and *Gone, But Not Forgotten* (1993) was transformed into a miniseries starring Brooke Shields—places many of his novels in the county where he lives. Although well-known in a popular genre that features suspense, thrills, exotic characters and intriguing ideas, these authors say there is little mystery to their labor, just pride of craftsmanship.



### Ridley Pearson

Before his first page-turner, *Never Look Back*, hit bookstores in 1985, Ridley Pearson spent a decade touring the country as a folk/rock musician, writing songs and scripting *Columbo* TV shows that never sold. Today, he’s authored more than 35 bestsellers and plays bass guitar for The Rock Bottom Remainders, a band formed by a book publicist in the early 1990s. The band consists of famous authors such as Stephen King, Scott Turow, Amy Tan, Mitch Albom and Dave Barry, who are now Pearson’s close friends.

The 58-year-old crime writer—who describes his books as “suspense thrillers” because “who done it” is often revealed long before the ending, and the real



Ridley Pearson spent a decade touring the country as a folk/rock musician before his first book was published. His current book, *In Harm’s Way*, features a Sun Valley–area sheriff.

question is whether the criminal can be caught before he hurts someone else—was inspired to start writing books in his 20s, after reading one of John MacDonald's Travis McGee books while on vacation in Florida.

After years of striving to hone his craft, Pearson finally obtained representation from a literary agent in the early 1980s. However, 23 publishers rejected that first book, so Pearson's second attempt, *Never Look Back*, became his first published piece.

But it was his Detective Lou Boldt character—who tracks down bad guys in Seattle's sometimes rainy, gloomy weather—who vaulted Pearson into national prominence. The Emerald City was on the author's radar because friends lived in the area, and he stayed with them in 1986 while researching *Undercurrents*.

He loves the city—"it's one of my favorites in any country," he says—and he appreciates how welcoming and cooperative Seattle law-enforcement professionals have been. He also enjoys capitalizing on the contrast between the seaminess of Seattle's Skid Row and the breathtaking beauty of Puget Sound. "With its fascinating geography and proximity to Canada, as well as its historical richness, including Native Americans and Chinese immigrants, the Northwest offers a lot—from its wide-open plains to its steep, punishing mountains," he says. "And it still holds mystery for many readers."

Dave Barry—who co-authors a Peter Pan-prequel series, *Starcatchers*, with Pearson—has noted that Pearson's deft use of place, along with his extreme organization, have been instrumental in his success. "Dave Barry jokes that if there were a letter that came before 'A' in the alphabet, I'd be that type," Pearson says.

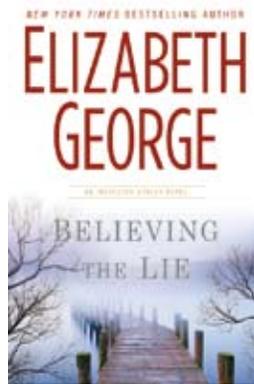
His penchant for planning and his consistent eight-hour workdays, six days a week, allow him to juggle many projects—not only his adult-crime-fiction books, the young adult-adventure *Starcatchers* series, but also the middle-school *Steel Trapp* series and the children's *Kingdom Keepers* books, set in Walt Disney World parks.

Pearson, who with his wife, Marcelle, parents teenage daughters named Paige and Storey, says he does not greatly modify his writing style for younger readers, except for the elimination of sex and profanity. "You don't want to talk down to kids because they sniff that out," he says. "You want to be able to read aloud to them, but at the same time, you want the kind of book that you would keep on reading if the kids fell asleep."

He adds that he is rarely "outside" his stories—"even if I go to a movie or take a shower." On the occasional "mashed potato" writing days, when he struggles with prose and plotting, he comforts himself with the knowledge that a revision typically remedies most problems. He aims for a compelling story with gripping, engaging characters. "Even if you have lots of action, if you don't care about the characters, the novel will be flat," he says.

The writer's next adult title, *The Risk Agent*, a Shanghai-based kidnapping story, is tentatively scheduled for publication this June. Pearson spent the 2008-2009 school year in Shanghai as a visiting professor at Fudan University's College of Foreign Language and Literature, and was soon captivated by the city. "Shanghai comes to own you," he says. "We found the atmosphere irresistible. It is a city constantly in motion, its people constantly wearing smiles. It is at once intoxicating and mesmerizing."

Pearson says he loves to tell stories, and his inspirations come from observations, experiences, newspapers and listening to others. "Everything has a story if you take the time to listen and look for it," he says.



## Elizabeth George

From her comfortable home on Whidbey Island, Elizabeth George writes "psychologically informed" British crime novels for adults and a new series for young adults about a psychically talented teenager who has just come to the island because she and her mother are on the run from the teen's stepfather in California.

A former Orange County, California, high school English teacher with a master's degree in counseling/psychology, George began writing at age 7. She started with English mysteries because even as a young girl, she enjoyed reading books in that genre. She visited London for the first time when she was 17 and fell in love with the city, and that furthered her interest in British culture, she says.

The acclaimed 62-year-old author—who has received the Anthony Award, the Agatha Award and France's Grand Prix de Littérature Policière—says she likes to temper the seriousness of her work by producing the occasional humorous, quirky character. Readers have enjoyed George's quick-tempered, wry-quip-producing crime sleuth Barbara Havers, a continuing character in the Inspector Lynley series, and in the 2010 book of the series, George intro-



Former schoolteacher Elizabeth George, famous for her Inspector Lynley series, began writing at age 7. *Believing the Lie*, the newest book in the series, is expected to be available in January. She has also started a new series set on Whidbey Island in Washington state.

duced the “fairly lighthearted” Freddie MacGhie.

“He adds lighter moments to offset some of the story’s considerable weight,” she says. “His attitude toward life leans toward the carefree. For instance, he’s divorced, but he still lives with his ex-wife, and has discovered Internet dating.”

Although George’s novels are largely character-driven, location features prominently, too. “For me, place functions as another character, and suggests atmosphere and theme,” says George, who set her upcoming *Believing the Lie* (January 2012) in the Cumbria Lake District of northern England.

“I like books that make it clear the writer experienced the place and didn’t just use generic details from the Internet,” she says. For accuracy’s sake, she visits each book’s setting up to three times.

George’s use of dialects and Britishisms are so dead-on (pardon the pun), they were one of the reasons the BBC elected to broadcast her stories between 2001 and 2007, she says. Readers also appreciate her careful attention to detail: One British fan, commenting on *For the Sake of Elena* (1993), which is set at Cambridge University, wrote, “You got even the smells right.” George spent two summers at Cambridge in the late 1980s to research the book, the fifth in the Inspector Lynley series.

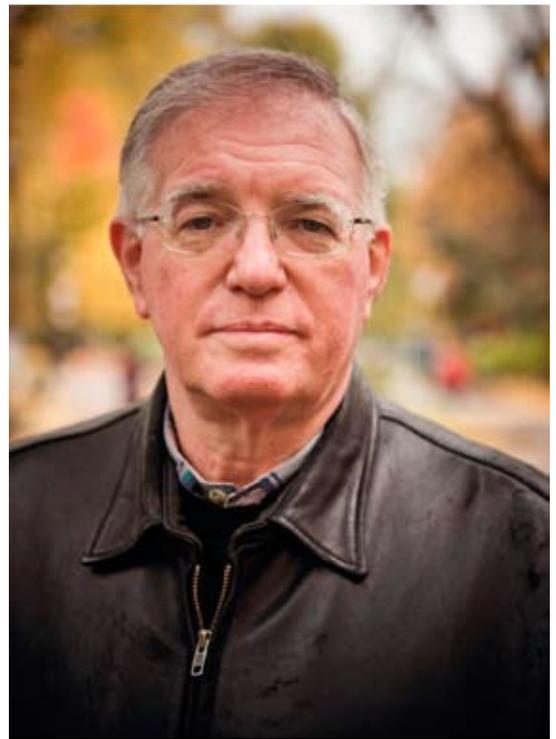
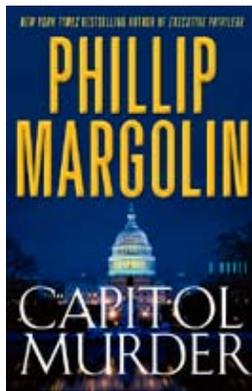
Last year, George announced she was starting the young-adult series featuring Whidbey Island, where she moved in 2006. She and her husband, Tom McCabe, chose the island for their new home because they wanted to live in an area that wasn’t overdeveloped, yet was near an international airport from which they could easily fly to England, she says.

Their nearly 10-acre property includes an English-style walled garden, and the house, located on a bluff, provides views of Saratoga Passage, Mount Baker and Camano Island. George values the island’s serenity and natural resources, and last year donated \$200,000 to help the Whidbey Camano Land Trust purchase and protect what is now the 654-acre Trillium Community Forest.

She also likes the “big weather” delivered by the Puget Sound area’s wind and rain, and says that Whidbey inspires her writing because its weather is similar to England’s, and because she feels a “mystical, visceral connection” to this place of water and woods. Plus, the 60-mile-long island is a fascinating part of the world, she says. It is a haven for artists yet also the base for a U.S. naval air station. It has deer-filled forests, mussel farms and coffee shops. Gray whales migrate past the coast, and scuba divers explore an artificial reef created by the state’s intentional 1983 sinking of a 1926 ferry that could no longer operate but had helped transport Japanese Washingtonians to internment camps during World War II.

“It’s the beauties and intrigue of Whidbey Island that inspired me to set the new series here,” George says.

Although she chose not to have children herself,



she decided to write a series for young adults because she likes young people—that’s one of the reasons she became a teacher—and she knows from her own childhood reading experiences that kids can appreciate a good mystery. The first book in the series, *The Edge of Nowhere: The Dog House*, scheduled to be released in fall 2012, is subtitled for the island’s 1908 Dog House Tavern, a landmark that closed in 2009.

The story starts with the female teenage protagonist bicycling 10 miles from a Whidbey Island ferry dock to the home of her mother’s friend, who has experienced a heart attack. “The mother is driving to the town of Nelson in British Columbia and can’t be reached,” says George, who has made the trip herself. “Her cell phone is out of range due to the Cascade Mountains.”

Self-taught, except for two creative writing classes at a community college when she was 19, George wrote several unpublished crime novels before her first published book—*A Great Deliverance* (1988)—debuted. “It was a tough learning curve for me, but well worth the work,” she says. She constructs her plots by first determining the killer, the motive and the victim. Then she “massages” the “story kernel” for characters, describing each in a three-page outline that pits that character’s emotional vulnerabilities against a particular conflict or stress. Next, she marries subplots to the “who-done-it” aspect, integrating multiple points of view.

George says she tends to “throw everything” into the first draft, then revises and trims the manuscript back about 100 pages, using feedback from a friend who was a fellow English teacher in Orange County and who serves as a “cold reader.”

“I give her questions to answer,” says George, “such as, ‘When did you infer his/her guilt?’ ”

The author is determined to always do the legwork needed to give readers her best effort. “Readers often think that writing a novel is the author’s effort to get in touch with the cosmos,

**Former Portland defense attorney Phillip Margolin—self-taught except for an undergraduate creative-writing course in which he earned a C-plus—is known for his extensive research. *Capitol Murder* is scheduled to be released this April.**

and that may be,” she says, “but what they may not realize is the amount of foundation work that goes into the construction of a novel.”

## Phillip Margolin

After writing two novels and several short stories that were rejected by publishers, Portland criminal defense attorney Phillip Margolin was surprised but thrilled by the 1978 publication of his novel *Heartstone*, based on the real-life 1960 murders of two college sweethearts in Oregon.

Margolin, who grew up reading Perry Mason novels, says he was “unbelievably lucky.” A serendipitous visit from a former NYU law school buddy who was a lawyer for a literary agency and gave the agency *Heartstone* to review, led to its sale and, three years later, to the publication of *The Last Innocent Man*.

*Heartstone* was nominated for the Mystery Writers of America’s 1979 Edgar Award for best original paperback, but since neither of Margolin’s two books was a bestseller, he continued to practice law. Over the years, he represented 30 people charged with homicide, as well as people accused of everything from DUIs to drug trafficking, and he led Oregon’s first “battered woman’s syndrome” defense.

“I lost the battle but won the war in that case,” he says. “My client was convicted of manslaughter, but the jurors wrote the judge a note and asked that he not punish her harshly. She received probation with six months’ local jail time.”

Although Margolin’s legal career was demanding, he did some writing on weekends and early mornings, and in 1993, *Gone, But Not Forgotten* was published. It did so well that *Heartstone* was re-released in 1994, and *The Last Innocent Man* was re-released in 1995, and both of those also became bestsellers.

However, it was challenging to travel for book tours while maintaining a legal practice, especially since he was handling death-penalty and federal-drug-conspiracy cases. By 1996, when his fifth fiction book, *Burning Man*, was published, he had appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, the Oregon Supreme Court and the Oregon Court of Appeals. Having “done almost everything a criminal defense attorney can do,” he decided to become a full-time writer, although he remains a member of the Oregon State Bar and the Federal Bar.

Margolin has written 10 more novels since 1996, all of them bestsellers. The 67-year-old attributes his achievements partly to a talent for analysis, as evidenced by his love of chess and puzzles.

“I’ll ask myself, ‘How can I put everything together for a coherent plot?’ ” he says, acknowledging that a favorite structural technique is to take unrelated story lines and combine them. “That’s how my brain works; I want the reader to think, ‘I didn’t see that coming.’ ”

An avid reader, but self-taught except for one American University undergraduate creative-writing class, in which he earned a C-plus, he writes from the same downtown Portland office where he practiced law.

Why does he make Portland the setting for many of his novels? It’s the “dark and stormy night” atmosphere of mystery, he says. “Portland gets a lot of rain, and when that happens, it’s spooky.”

He says he varies his novels’ themes as much to amuse himself as his audience. Ideas for his fictional thrillers come from a variety of places (he kids about dialing 1-800-IDEAS), including a newspaper-clippings file, scenes from movies, dinner conversations, even posters.

“A few months ago, I was at a writer’s conference in Georgia,” he says, “and in a restaurant bathroom, over the toilet, hung a photograph. It was so thought-provoking, I’ve already got the idea and cover for the novel; all I need now is a plot.”

He doesn’t want to tip his hand by telling what the photo was, but says he allows a plot to percolate for anywhere from a few days to 20 years, then prepares a detailed 25- to 60-page outline that always includes an ending.

Each paragraph usually corresponds to a book chapter. The outline functions as a road map and a preventive for writer’s block. “I don’t care about quality in the first draft,” he says. “I just want to get it down.”

After every 100 pages, he prints out that section of the draft and rewrites. His editor receives a completed draft Margolin feels comfortable with.

Margolin’s legal expertise infuses his books with realism, and he researches areas such as forensics—for example, blood spatter and DNA testing—as diligently as he did as a defense lawyer when he prepared to interrogate expert witnesses.

He says he spent a lot of time in Washington, D.C., learning what it’s like to be in one of the federal halls of power, to gather material for his trilogy, *Executive Privilege* (2008), *Supreme*

*Justice* (2010) and the new *Capitol Murder* (April 2012).

He notes that his character-development skills have come a long way. On his first few books, his editor complained that his characters all sounded and acted the same, so he started fleshing them out with hobbies, habits and idiosyncrasies. Creating female protagonists especially challenged him, but modeling them after different attributes of his strong-willed attorney wife, who passed away in 2007 due to cancer, helped him get over that hurdle. So did reading dialogue aloud to check for authenticity.

“I encourage criticism,” Margolin says. “I tell my editor to let me know what’s not working. And I don’t care if a good idea comes from me, my editor or my best friend.”

One thing he does care about is interviewers who reveal too much plot, as once happened on a book tour. “He [the TV interviewer] asked me, ‘How can you make the lawyer the murderer?’” Margolin says. “I tried to cover up and distract viewers, and as soon as we went off the air, the interviewer apologized.”

Margolin recently completed the first three chapters of an international thriller tentatively called *The Ottoman Scepter*, and he and his 33-year-old daughter, Ami Margolin Rome, co-authored *Vanishing Acts*, for kids ages 8 to 12, which was released last month.

The story is about a 12-year-old whose best friend fails to show up for the first day of school. The girl tries to find her friend while also helping her trial-attorney father as he works on a case related to another missing person, the woman who was her second-grade teacher.

In addition, Margolin and his brother Jerry contributed to *A Study in Sherlock*, an anthology of stories inspired by Sherlock Holmes, also published last month. Edited by Laurie R. King and Leslie S. Klinger, it includes stories by numerous prominent writers, such as Dana Stabenow and Tony Broadbent.

“I’m still learning on the job,” Margolin says, “but that’s part of the fun.” His philosophical mindset helps him weather harsh reviews. “I’d have to be egocentric to think that everyone is going to like my books,” he says. “If the reviewer is honest and not trying to be mean, I don’t care that it’s negative. I consider whether there’s something in it I should pay attention to.” ■

*Writer Janice Arenofsky lives in the Phoenix area.*