

## Frequently Asked Questions for Pamela Samuels-Young

### 1. What inspired you to write a novel?

I love reading mysteries, particularly those that involve fascinating legal cases. It bothered me, however, that African-American characters were basically non-existent in commercial legal fiction. So I decided to fill that void.

I knew pretty early that I wanted to be a writer, having worked on my school newspaper in junior high school, and thereafter in high school and college. When I decided to major in journalism at the University of Southern California, I didn't give much thought to creative writing. At the age of 18, I didn't have the guts to even consider a career as a novelist. The writers I enjoyed reading – James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Joan Didion – were incredibly talented literary writers. I knew I didn't have that kind of poetic writing talent. So I pursued a career in journalism. I guess it took all these years for me to gather the confidence to give creative writing a try.

### 2. Did *In Firm Pursuit* stem from your personal experiences as a lawyer?

Yes, but I took quite a few liberties with the real facts. I defended a corporation being sued by a former employee who was fired for sexual harassment. He denied engaging in harassment and claimed the company fired him because he was African-American. I prevailed at trial and won a defense verdict in that case. The attorney in *In Firm Pursuit*, however, begins to have doubts as to whether the fired employee actually committed sexual harassment. In my case, I never had those doubts.

### 3. Why do you think sexual harassment continues to be a problem today?

One reason is that we have more men and women working together than ever before, in all types of jobs. While we're much more enlightened as a society, people are still people, and unfortunately, they sometimes behave inappropriately in the workplace. Sexual harassment isn't what it used to be. Men aren't grabbing women's breasts or saying: "Go out with me or you're fired." It's much more subtle, and in a growing number of cases, women are the alleged harassers. A lot of the cases I've handled involved consensual relationships gone bad. The relationship is over, but one of the parties doesn't want it to end. And when you bring that situation into the workplace, it poses liability for the company, especially when the alleged harasser is a manager. Once the company has notice of the alleged harassing conduct, it has a legal obligation to stop it. A company that fails to do so runs the risk of being hit with a multi-million dollar jury award.

**4. Your novels have been described as “John Grisham with a sister’s twist.” How do you feel about that label?**

I’m thrilled. He’s one of my favorite authors. Any comparison is absolutely welcomed. It’s my goal to be recognized as a writer of entertaining legal thrillers.

**5. You continue to work as an employment lawyer for a major corporation. How do you find the time to write?**

When I’m not at work, I’m usually someplace writing – be it at home, the library or the nearest Starbucks. Sometimes I write early in the morning before work, other times I’m up until one or two in the morning typing away on my laptop. My most productive writing time is when I can get away from home and lock myself in my timeshare in Palm Desert for a weekend. When I’m in that environment, the writing is non-stop. The hardest part is trying to find time to write when I’m touring. Promoting the book takes more time than I ever imagined it would. But I love meeting readers. That’s the best part.

**6. What has impacted your writing more, your work as a television news writer or as an attorney?**

I think both have played equal roles because they are both great prerequisites for being a novelist. To be a good journalist or a good lawyer you have to be a good storyteller. If the person who’s writing the news can’t effectively communicate what happened to the viewing audience, then she’s failed. The same thing applies to the law. When you’re standing before those twelve jurors making that closing argument, you have to tell them a story – your client’s story – and convince them that you deserve their vote when they go back into the jury room to deliberate.

You also have to be clear and concise to be an effective communicator. The years I spent in television newsrooms in Detroit and Los Angeles writing fifteen and thirty-second stories under deadline pressure helped me tremendously as a novelist. While I have limited time to write, I’m a pretty fast writer and my writing style is very concise.

**7. How did growing up in Compton influence your writing?**

Growing up in Compton gave me a very grounded perspective on life. When I mention my hometown, people automatically assume that I dodged bullets on the way to school every day. But it was nothing like that. I had two strong, hard-working parents, who still live in Compton today. The foundation they laid – faith in God, hard work and education – is responsible for who I am and what I have achieved.

In fact, I consider myself the ideal poster child for affirmative action. Affirmative action gave me access to opportunities I would not have otherwise had, but it was my responsibility to perform after those doors were opened to me. And I did. Pretty well, in fact, against people who grew up with far more and far better resources than I had. The dismantling of affirmative action programs in education really pains me. I hope to explore that in a future novel.

**8. Describe your writing process?**

I will spend weeks outlining a book before I sit down to write. I also mull over my story a lot. I'm thinking about it in the shower, while I'm standing in line at the grocery store, during my 45-minute commute to work. I can almost see each chapter as if it were a scene in a movie. Only after I have a completed outline do I start writing. And when I write, I go from page one to the last page without doing much editing. For me, it's psychologically motivating to complete that first draft, even if it's so bad I'd never dare show it to anyone. Once I have a finished first draft, then the real writing starts. For me, it's all about the editing. I edit, edit and edit some more.

**9. What writers inspired you to write?**

I enjoy reading both commercial and literary fiction and some of my favorite authors include Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and Joan Didion. Other writers I enjoy are Walter Mosley, Valerie Wilson Wesley, Michael Connelly, James Patterson, Terry McMillan, John Grisham, Bob Woodward and Joseph Finder.

But if there's one book that impacted me more than any other, it would have to be Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*. I can still remember stumbling across a copy of the book at my aunt's house when I was about twelve. It was the first book I remember reading that had African-American characters and I was thrilled to be reading about people who looked like me. It was also a very gritty and graphic coming of age story. I promptly "borrowed" the book without asking for permission for fear that my aunt would think I was too young to be reading such a sexually graphic book. After that, I developed an insatiable appetite for African-American fiction.

**10. Where do you find story ideas?**

I see and hear great stories all the time. The employment cases I've handled over the years have involved wonderful characters and intriguing facts that provide the seeds for great legal thrillers. I'm constantly jotting down things that my friends say and tearing news stories out of newspapers and magazines. I find stories everywhere. I just wish there were enough hours in the day to turn them all into novels.

**11. What advice would you give aspiring writers?**

Study the writing craft. I think most people who want to write a novel just start writing. That's certainly what I did. And I was really disappointed when people didn't like my early efforts. I had no clue about story structure. It wasn't until I began to really *study* the writing of other authors that I began to understand story structure. I put a lot of effort into trying to figure out what makes a book a page-turner. For example, James Patterson's *Roses Are Red* is a real page-turner. Only after I took the time to analyze the book by taking each chapter apart and looking at its elements did I understand how Patterson was able to keep readers so engaged from beginning to end.

**12. How did you handle rejection as a writer?**

It was really tough. I've had lots of accomplishments in my life, but none was as difficult to achieve as writing a novel, finding an agent and getting a book deal. Writing is very subjective. The same book one person loves, another person may hate. While it can get you down at times, you have to have faith in your talent and keep getting back up – no matter how many times people knock you down. That's essentially what I did. Every time I received a rejection letter from an agent, I whined about it, but I never stopped believing that I would eventually be a published author.

**13. What's next?**

My short story, *Setup*, is featured in the anthology *Landmarked for Murder*, published in late 2006 by Top Publications in conjunction with the Los Angeles chapter of Sisters in Crime, the mystery writers' organization. I'm currently working on my third legal thriller.

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