

FIRST-PERSON ESSAY

A Mistake Worth Making

An essay by *Unswept Graves* author Robert A. Black. This essay may be reprinted as a whole or in part. For digital copy, contact the author at rablack@rablack.com.

“Where do you get your ideas?”

It’s a question every writer faces from time to time. Some authors have had to answer it so many times that they’ve come up with pretty clever things to say. But in the case of *Unswept Graves*, I expect I’ll be asked that question more often than usual. Chinese immigrants in San Francisco? Where did that subject come from? I’m not even Chinese. (I do have a Chinese sister-in-law, but I started working on *Unswept Graves* before I’d even met her.)

The truth is that the idea came from a mistake – a mistake I made while working on something completely different. And the way that mistake became a novel is a good illustration of how the writing process works, and also of why it’s important not to give up after a failure.

About ten years ago, I was working on several different story ideas. I always have a number of them tucked away in various cubbyholes inside my head. One was set in a typical small Midwestern town – but I didn’t want it to be *too* typical. I like to throw things into my stories that the readers aren’t expecting. If you know your American history, then you’ll know that most of these small towns were originally settled by European immigrants, people from places like Germany, Scandinavia, Great Britain, and so on. My own ancestors were such people. I thought it would be fun to surprise readers with a town where one of the founding families came from somewhere else. What if they came from China instead? I picked China almost at random, but I liked the idea enough to go with it.

It didn’t take me long to make up an entire history for this Chinese family. There had been a railroad worker, I imagined, who dreamed the American dream just like European settlers did, and so when the railroad was finished, he found a plot of land on the prairie and started building a life for himself and his family. It all made perfect sense.

It was also completely *wrong*.

I didn’t need to do much research before my idea fell apart. Chinese culture focuses more on the importance of the community over the individual, so Chinese immigrants didn’t strike out for the frontier on their own. And even if they wanted to, America was full of anti-Chinese

prejudice back in the frontier days, which would have turned any Chinese settlers into targets of persecution. No, most Chinese immigrants in the 1800s stuck together in cities like San Francisco, where they followed their own ways and did what they could to earn money for their families back in China. My idea simply wasn't going to work.

But I wasn't going to give up that easily. By that time, I had already learned about things like the practice of selling young girls into servitude as *mui tsai*, and the efforts of Donaldina Cameron and the Presbyterian Mission Home to rescue such girls and give them new lives. I had a good story in front of me, and I didn't want to let it go.

That's when I decided to turn my original mistake into an advantage. "What if," I thought to myself, "my original idea is *fake*? What if it's a lie the family told everyone to avoid being kicked out of the country?" In that case, then my book would be the story of how my main character, Jasmine Wu, discovered the truth. And what better way for her to discover the truth than by living it herself?

From there, it was a matter of reading and researching, like going on a treasure hunt for clues to the story. It can take a while – typically, I'll do research for one book while I'm writing another. With time and patience, the story comes together. It's like a big jigsaw puzzle. At first, you're just trying to find enough pieces to show you what the finished picture is supposed to look like and where its edges are. Once you have those, you can start looking for pieces to fill in any gaps.

Mistakes are a part of being human. We all make them. But if you look at them in the right way, mistakes can become opportunities – chances to discover things you never knew before, or to do things you never even thought of doing before. A wrong turn can lead you down an exciting new path, full of unexpected adventures. You just have to be willing to explore it.



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