

## When Something's Not Quite Right

I am so excited to be with you today to talk about how the first two pages of my cozy mystery novel, *Well Read, Then Dead*, came to be. I believe the story's beginning enticed folks to read further and resulted in the book being recently nominated for an Agatha Award for Best First Novel.

A few years ago I decided to write a cozy series set on the barrier island community of Fort Myers Beach on the Gulf Coast of South Florida. Now Fort Myers Beach is a real place, and I wanted to keep true to this fantastic beach and resort community, but I still needed to invent a fictional location within Fort Myers Beach for my characters to use as a base. It had to be a warm, welcoming place smelling of delicious food and filled with books and sunshine. So I invented the Read 'Em and Eat café and bookstore owned by protagonist Sassy Cabot and her "bestie" Bridgy Mayfield.

I wanted to jump right into the action of the Read 'Em and Eat and introduce the reader to Sassy and Bridgy, whose friendship easily survives the day-to-day clashes of running a small business together. So when I wrote the opening paragraphs for the story, Sassy and Bridgy were in the middle of a spat about Bridgy lending out a coffee pot and also contracting for a baby shower to be held in the café at the exact time the Mysterious Madames book club organized by Sassy usually meets.

My initial plan was for Sassy and Bridgy to argue briefly, then have the argument interrupted by the arrival of the members of the Books Before Breakfast club. After the club meeting was over, I would have Sassy and Bridgy find a resolution to the baby shower/book club scheduling snafu, all designed to show the great friendship that has existed since their childhood days in Brooklyn. Interesting? Perhaps. But on second thought (and all future thoughts during the writing process), the "best buds have a fight and make up" concept had nothing about it that would give the reader a hankering to linger in the Read 'Em and Eat for a glass of sweet tea and some Miss Marple Scones. The purpose of the section was simply to showcase the relationship between Sassy and Bridgy, which could easily bring many a reader to think, "Meh. So what?"

I decided to let the reader discover the Yin and Yang of Sassy and Bridgy's wonderful friendship in bits and pieces throughout *Well Read, Then Dead* and future books in the series. My next idea was to jump right into the action of the final few minutes of the Books Before Breakfast club meeting. Take a look at the opening sentences of *Well Read, Then Dead*:

*"Oh, pu-leeze, Rowena, Anya Seton never measured up to Daphne du Maurier's elegance. I'm shocked you would say such a thing." Jocelyn Kendall, pastor's wife and book club gadfly, crossed and recrossed her legs in perfect tempo with the ever-*

*increasing meter of her rant. Our discussion of Green Darkness was deteriorating rapidly.*

*“For example, in Rebecca . . .”*

*Recalling last year’s “Battle of the Brontë Sisters” completely ruining one meeting of the Books Before Breakfast Club, followed by minor skirmishes flaring up during the next two or three, I interrupted with a feigned look at my watch and as much cheer as I could muster.*

*“I’d no idea it was so late. We need to select this month’s book.” I tried for a smile bright enough to encourage participation. “Does anyone have a suggestion?”*

After reading these few sentences we know that we are at a book club meeting, someone named Rowena has annoyed Jocelyn by comparing Anya Seton favorably to Daphne du Maurier, and the moderator is desperate to avoid lengthy arguments, which often have spillovers in this particular group. We also got an inkling that these book club members are not boring people. Ideally folks will keep reading to find out if Jocelyn or Rowena will back down, or will there be prolonged argument? And who else is at the meeting?

Let’s find out.

*Jocelyn pushed a hank of hair, the color and texture of straw, off her forehead and glared at the other four women sitting in a semicircle, as if daring anyone to answer me. She certainly didn’t intimidate the oldest member of the book club, Miss Augusta Maddox, who glared back, shoved her own copy of Green Darkness into a faded denim tote and zipped it shut. Then, tilting to her left, Miss Augusta nudged my favorite club member, Miss Delia Batson, who leaned in and handed me a piece of paper, edged by two sharp creases where it had been doubled and doubled again. As always, Delia avoided eye contact, gazing instead at her veined and mottled hands, now primly resting in her generous lap, fingers tightly interlocked.*

*“Well, thank you, Miss Delia”—I flipped opened her note and was relieved she was moving us in a completely different direction—“for suggesting the lighthearted Sheriff Dan Rhodes series by Bill Crider. Has anyone a particular favorite we might try?”*

*From the far side of the café, my BFF and business partner, Bridgy Mayfield, shot me a wink and a thumbs-up.*

Now we’ve met two more book club members, and we’ve learned these two at least are used to Jocelyn’s bullying and have deliberately chosen to ignore her. Although Sassy hasn’t introduced herself yet, she does introduce the reader to Bridgy and gives the first brief peek at their relationship as friends and business partners. So I ran a wide circle from the first two pages being all about Sassy and Bridgy’s relationship to it having the briefest of mentions. I am always delighted when readers say that as soon as they heard about the business partnership, they wondered how it would work out. One person told

me she thought Sassy or Bridgy would be the murder victim, and the other would be the accused. If I'd gone with my original plan, I would have spoiled all that speculation.

At the end of the second page we meet a breakfast regular, Judge Harcroft, whose personality comes through instantly and who gives us a hint that we will meet a wide variety of patrons in the Read 'Em and Eat.

*Irritated by our conversation, Judge Harcroft harrumphed and rattled his copy of our local broadsheet, the Fort Myers Beach News. He was sitting at the Dashiell Hammett table, right next to the café's book nook, not exactly a haven of peace and quiet during book club meetings, but he refused to sit anywhere else. His erect posture, immaculate white collared shirt and impeccably groomed, albeit thinning, gray hair gave the impression that he was merely on a short break from presiding over a momentous, legally significant trial, instead of being retired from traffic court for less than a year. The judge's ongoing routine drove everyone crazy. "I'll have just a Dash of milk, thank you." Or, when he finally folded up his newspaper, getting ready to leave, "Enjoy your day. I must Dash." His strident chuckle left everyone in hearing distance gritting their teeth.*

I think you would agree that this is a much better first two pages than Sassy and Bridgy having and resolving an argument. And by now you are probably wondering who, exactly, gets killed. If you crave more of the Read 'Em and Eat café and bookstore, I have great news. For some reason known only to them, Amazon has printed the first three chapters plus a snippet of chapter four on the sales pages of *Well Read, Then Dead* for mass market paperback, kindle and large print format. So [click on over](#) and learn a little more about the eccentric and entertaining goings on in the Read 'Em and Eat. Just be careful—there is a murder.



Terrie Farley Moran is the author the Read 'Em and Eat series published by Berkley Prime Crime. *Well Read, Then Dead*, nominated for the Agatha Award for Best First Novel, was released in August 2014. It will be followed by *Caught Read-Handed* to be released on July 7, 2015. Terrie also writes short mystery fiction which has been published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* and various anthologies. Her short stories have been short-listed twice for Best American Mystery Stories. Terrie's website is [www.terriefarleymoran.com](http://www.terriefarleymoran.com), and you can find her blogging amid the grand banter of an eclectic group of writers known as the Women of Mystery, [www.womenofmystery.net](http://www.womenofmystery.net). You can find her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/terriefarleymoran>