

## The First Two Pages of GREENFELLAS: In Which Introductions Are Made

by Robert Lopresti

When I wrote the first two pages of my new novel I had three goals in mind - besides the obvious one of starting the damned thing, of course.

First, I wanted to tell the readers something very specific about my protagonist, to prepare them for some of the odd turns the book would take. You see, GREENFELLAS is a novel about a mobster, but it is not a typical crime story. It's a comic tale of a top Mafiosi who, upon becoming a grandfather, decides it is up to him to save the environment for his little granddaughter.

But that moment of enlightenment doesn't come for several chapters, and I wanted the reader to know from the start that Sal is someone willing to go the extra mile for his family. Therefore the book opens like this:

*“I want that jerk dead this week,” said Sal Caetano. “Before my granddaughter is born. Call it a goddamned birthday present. She’ll come into a world that is better by having one less jackass in it.”*

So we know Sal is a criminal, not a nice guy, and sentimental about his family. So far, so good.

When it came to my other two issues, I had my own moment of enlightenment. In fact, I made a discovery that I don't remember ever seeing in a how-to-write article before, and the cool thing is, that since I stumbled on this point I have used it successfully in other fiction.

So what is this shocking insight? Simply this: Sometimes it is better to have *two* problems with a piece of writing than it is to have *one*.

Why? Because Problem A may hold the solution to Problem B and vice versa. Instead of seeing them as two different issues to cope with, see what happens if you look at them together.

Let me explain. My Problem A was that the opening scene takes place in a

crowded restaurant, at what is essentially a board meeting of the Napolito crime family. There are about ten people present. That is *way* too many characters to throw at a reader on the first page. They will never keep track of them all.

But the fact is, they don't have to. Only four of the people present are going to be important in the book. I just had to figure out a way to make that clear.

Which brings me to my Problem B. GREENFELLAS is filtered through a lively voice. The book is third person, universal narrator, and such volumes tend to have an invisible narrating voice; you are not meant to be aware that anyone is speaking at all.

In comic novels this is often not the case. Compare, for example, the hilarious narrating voice of a Donald E. Westlake's novel about John Dortmunder to the deliberately flat tone of an Elmore Leonard novel.

I wanted to establish right from the start that this is the sort of book where the narrator takes sides and gets chatty. The sort of book where the voice may stop in the middle of the action to, for instance, explain the finer points of New Jersey mob geography, or relate how Sal the Screwdriver got his nickname. But how could I do that, in the first two pages?

It's easy, once you remember Problem A: too many characters for the reader to keep track of. We continue right after Sal's opening line:

*The usual crowd at the back table at the Blue Venice Restaurant laughed, all except one serious guy, who was frowning. "Language, Sal," he muttered. He wasn't referring to the swearing.*

*"What? I said I wanted him dead. That's nothing. If everyone I said that about died the cemeteries would be stacked up like skyscrapers."*

*"Wait a minute," said Vince Napolito. The old man was so pudgy his eyes were sunk in pools of fat. His puffy fingers rubbed the red and white checked tablecloth. "If your daughter's kid hasn't been born yet, how the hell can you know it's a girl?"*

*There was a moment of silence and cautious glances. If the boss had forgotten about ultrasounds, what else was he forgetting?*

*“They got this new technology, Vince,” said Sal. “Doctors can do tests when a gal’s pregnant. Tell ya if it’s a boy or a girl. Practically tell the kid’s favorite ice cream and whether they’ll be a Mets fan or a Yankees fan.”*

*“Better be a Mets fan,” said one of the younger capos. “Not one of them Yankee rats, right Vince?”*

*As usual, Vince ignored the sucking up. Sal used to think it was deliberate but nowadays you couldn’t tell whether he was paying attention or not.*

*Sal wondered if Richie Venizio was noticing, but the underboss was doing his other job, running the restaurant. At the moment that meant chewing out a waitress for something or other. When he had her in tears he would return to the party.*

*“Sounds to me,” said Vince, “like when the old ladies used to bring girls who were expecting to the gypsies. They’d have the girl pee on a egg or something and break it open.”*

*Johnny Scorzza made a face and pushed his dinner plate away. The enforcer could kill anybody without blinking an eye, but bodily functions made him queasy. Some people joked that he was a virgin, but not to his face.*

*“Supposedly the gypsy could tell by what was in the egg whether the girl was gonna have a boy or a girl. You telling me they got doctors doing that crap now?”*

*“I don’t think there are any eggs involved,” said Sal.*

Do you see what happened there? Sal, Vince, Richie, and Scorzza are identified by name, and most are tagged with their place in the crime family hierarchy. The others remain shadowy: "a young guy," "a serious guy." More of these shadows appear quickly.

The chatty narrator is helpfully telling you which characters you need to

concern yourself with. (And by the way, a passionate reader, after finishing the book could come back to the start and put names to all those minor characters - but he or she doesn't need to in order to enjoy the book.)

So, if I have done my job right, you know who the main characters are, you know that Sal is already seeing the world through the lens of his soon-to-be-grandfather status, and you know that the narrator is going to play an active part in the story. All done before the verdict is delivered on the guy Sal wants killed. Now my only remaining problem was writing three hundred more pages.



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