

HOOK, LINE AND WINKER

by Robert Mangeot

Problems. Every writer has them, not least an opening that grabs a reader by the eyeballs. Setting, mood, point of view, conflict all packaged and launched just so, in two pages. But in a short story, two pages will have plowed deep into the proceedings, a sharp hook and set-up combined, every line serving both masters. Get the balance wrong, and the reader slips off that hook.

Like I said, problems. But as Chinese philosophers and motivational speakers point out, every problem is also an opportunity. In this case, to perform some literary judo and dump trouble square onto our characters. I try to open with the POV immersed in a problem core to the theme. It might be the main problem or a foreshadowing, whichever resonates best until *The End*.

My “Two Bad Hamiltons and a Hirsute Jackson,” in the May 2015 *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, begins this way. Here’s our narrator Vi opening events:

The Secret Service guy asked me to repeat myself, which did not bode well for either his cognitive or listening skills. But he was the Fed and I was the industrial engineer, so I’d go easy on the coaching. Maybe he started Mondays slow.

That burst delivers a hook: the Secret Service asking questions, and they’re not an agency known for innocuous questions. A statement they want repeated isn’t likely frivolous either. But the burst comes laced with set-up. Vi inserts herself, judging the guy. We get her character, interpersonal conflict, the comic tone and the When. What is the reader left to wonder? The Why. For some reason this Monday morning, Vi must repeat herself to the Feds.

The early drafts began halfway into this scene, with lots of conflict and open questions, and it didn’t work. Problems? I’m talking stinking heap of confusion. Honestly, it’s only with a few years of writing distance that I see how rewinding grounds the story, how it frames crucial dynamics. At the time, though, I breathed sweet relief that something finally seemed to click.

OK, back to Vi:

“You got this place set up all wrong,” I said. “Your credenza is at a severe angle over your right shoulder. You want to pinch a nerve? Between that and, no offense, the low degree of organization on your desk, your frequently used case files aren’t quickly accessible.”

Behind his clutter Special Agent Wiggins failed to hide an eye roll. We process engineers dealt with the eye roll more days than not, and if it stung a little, such was the price we paid for sharing our wisdom.

In hindsight, this passage feels short on narrative. Better to have shown more of the cluttered office before Vi lets him have it. You win this round, writing problems.

Fortunately I navigated a stickier wicket. A risk. Her fixating on the agent's clutter deflates any grand stakes, and that's the point, a signal that the stakes are personal, not a tick-tick-tick thrill ride to save the President. An undercurrent, though, keeps the conflict buzzing. Has she really answered Wiggins or is she taking up Secret Service time? He has an opinion:

"Let's stick to why you're here, Ms. Celucci."

"Everybody calls me Vi." I removed from my navy blue Furla bag two plastic baggies, in each a counterfeit ten-dollar bill. This was a snap to do with my purse handy and arranged for efficient access, concepts Agent Eyeball needed to observe and consider. "Saturday I got slipped a couple bogus sawbucks."

Now comes her external crisis: two bogus sawbucks. Yep, a pair of counterfeit tens. A crime, but let's face it, nobody's crime of the century. Nobody other than Vi.

He burned an entire minute flipping the baggies back and forth in front of his face. This I took as a worse sign, the guy in charge of investigating counterfeits having to squint at obvious counterfeits.

"Probably the top one is fooling you with the good paper," I said. "These guys have connections to score currency bond. But the blur in the scrollwork isn't from wear. Put that puppy under a jeweler's glass, you'll see what I mean."

For hook, her frustration mounts. For set-up, her obsessive personality steams to the surface. Which hints at yet another story problem: How is it Average Citizen Vi knows so much about currency printing? Sure, humor grants room for license, but a reader wants to buy even a comic premise. In the early drafts I attempted to explain this here, but much wringing of hands and beta readers led me to cut it. Let Vi be Vi, they said, and keep the story flowing.

Wiggins burns that minute and says:

"It's a '96 series. The other is an '04." He gave me the squint treatment. "You're no Kentucky girl, are you?"

Finally, a glimmer of insight out of him, even if picking up on accents didn't require years of Fed training. What I didn't like was how his squint had turned a low grade of oily. More easily detected than my hard vowels should have been I was out of his league, even out of his quartile.

"Providence," I said. "Check out the portrait on the second fake there. No dimension to it, nothing like a legit Hamilton. And he's got one eye shut. They have him winking at you."

Fresh problems. The good folks of Louisville speak a blend of Southern and Midwestern. Vi, not so much, a North Atlantic Cod-out-of-water. Now the story needs to slow for a set-up beat.

Lacking explanation, a reader might close the book muttering how my Louisville had transported BRIGADOON-style to New England. Rewrite--lots of it--stumbled on Wiggins broaching the subject on the reader's behalf. He does, plus hitting on her shows he's not exactly leaping up to investigate. Alas, poor Wiggins, no joy. He can but return to the bad Hamiltons at hand:

"Different handiwork at the same time is damn rare. Where'd you pick these up?"

"That has me stumped," I said, pained to admit my ignorance. Specifically, it pained me behind my molars. "Saturday somewhere in Crescent Hill. I made out a list."

"There's a form," he said, searching through his stacks. Normally I'd cut a Fed some slack over working on tight budgets, but this was Louisville. Fed Triple-A ball. Plenty of time to get the paper flow right.

"Well, thanks for bringing them in," he said. "Believe it or not, some folks don't go to the trouble over twenty dollars."

"Hey, I tag and bag." I produced my Counterfeit Note Report filled out in duplicate as per online instructions. If that didn't demonstrate orderliness and preparation, nothing would. "So what's next? These guys are soiling my neighborhood."

Originally that exchange went on longer, with Vi getting off more good lines, but eventually I realized that courted problems with pace and tension. Endless banter can hoist a humor story on its own petard. No, the hook is baited and the set-up complete. Time to propel Vi into action.

He tossed my file atop his sea of disarray. "We'll call if we need you."

"You needed me a long time ago. Come on, a half-hour scoping tops, and I'll sketch you out a filing system that'll blow your mind."

"You're asking to go through Secret Service files?"

"I'm not charging for it. Pro bono. So shoot me whatever nondisclosure forms you need signed."

Wiggins hit me with a harsher version of his eye roll. "I'll have to say no. Very much no, Ms. Celucci."

"Fine," I said. Agent Wiggins could ignore the laws of ergonomics at his own risk.

So wraps two opening pages of hook, line and set-up. At her well-organized wits' end, of course Vi will just have to solve this case herself. Which addresses a last problem endemic to amateur sleuths: why are they amateur sleuthing in the first place? Seriously, just leave the case to the cops. Vi can't let the two bad Hamiltons go because clearly the Secret Service has big problems.

More to a reader's interest, so does Vi.

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