

PLANTING QUESTIONS

Earl Staggs

To draw readers into a story, I try to reach into their heads and get a good grip on their curiosity. I figure if I do that and hold on tight, they'll stick with the story until I satisfy that curiosity.

To put it another way, in the opening paragraphs, I try to plant questions in the minds of readers that are intriguing enough they'll keep reading until their questions are answered.

To put it still another way. . . never mind. It might be better to illustrate it with an example.

Here's the beginning of one of my short stories:

Title: Dead Wife Walking

Her auburn hair was longer and she was deeply tanned, but she was still beautiful and still moved with the flowing grace of a runway model. There was no doubt in my mind. The woman who had just entered my favorite restaurant in Tarpon Springs, Florida, was Janice Whitmore.

Four months ago, Janice Whitmore's car went over an embankment and exploded in Fort Worth, Texas. The car blazed for thirty minutes before emergency equipment arrived. She was not thrown from the car, and she did not escape from it. There was nothing left of her but ashes.

I know. I watched.

By the time readers reached this point, I wanted them to have two questions firmly implanted:

- How can this woman be entering a restaurant if she died four months ago?
- Who is this man who is sure she died because he watched her burn to ashes?

My hope was that readers would be intrigued enough to keep reading until the questions were answered.

Sometimes, the questions are more subtle. The next example is from another story:

Title: Baltimore Bounty

“I have to go to Baltimore,” I said.

She hesitated. I knew what she was thinking. “Baltimore?”

“According to my sources, that’s where he would go. His mother still lives there.”

She fiddled with papers on her desk and didn’t look at me. “Do you have an address for the mother?”

“No. She has no phone listing, at least not under her own name, but I should be able to track her down. I still have some contacts there.”

I shouldn’t have said that. She continued to fiddle and said softly, “I know you do.”

I got up, rounded the desk and cupped her cheeks in my hands. “Bev, that other stuff is ancient history. This trip is strictly business, okay?”

She looked up at me, and I kissed her on the forehead.

She tried to give me a smile, but it was weak. “Okay. Just be careful.”

“Not to worry. Love you, Babe.”

“Love you too, Jack.”

My plan with this opening was to leave the reader wanting to know:

- Why must Jack go to Baltimore?
- What is it about Baltimore that bothers Bev?
- What is this stuff Jack calls “ancient history?”

Continuing the story a little further, I answered some questions and tried to plant some more

At 4:30 that afternoon, I was on I-95 South with a two-hour drive ahead of me. Tommy Roselli pulled a string of convenience store robberies in South Philly. In the last one, he nearly beat a seventy-year-old man to death. Two weeks ago, after his trial, he climbed out a window of the men’s room on the third floor of the Court House and managed a miraculous escape. The old man’s family scraped together a twenty thousand dollar reward for bringing him in. When the bail bonding business is slow, I go out after bounties. That’s why I was going to Baltimore. It sure as hell wasn’t to see Sandy. I’d seen the last of her three years ago when I came home and found her in bed with another guy. After I beat the shit out of the guy, I quit the Baltimore police force, moved to Philly and met Bev.

Bev inherited the Liberty Bail Bonding Agency from her dad, and I signed on as a skip tracer. I don’t know why she put up with me. That first six months, I spent more time drinking than working. When I finally told her about Sandy, she pretty much took charge of my life and got me off the sauce. Hell, she even got me to quit smoking which, for a three-pack-a-day man, was as hard as giving up the booze. Somewhere along the way, I realized she was the best thing that ever happened to me.

To find Roselli’s mother, I’d have to call on Mel Thomas. Mel knew where every scumbag in Baltimore was hiding and if he didn’t know, he knew someone who did. Mel

was my old partner on the force. He was also the guy I beat the crap out of when I found him in bed with Sandy. He should be over it by now. I was.

By this point in the story, I hoped readers would have more questions:

- Will Jack and Mel be friendly when they meet in spite of what happened before?
- Is Jack *really* over his past with Sandy, or will old feelings rise up and be a problem for him and Bev?

So that's my plan when I begin a new story. It's all about planting questions in the minds of readers. If I do it right, they'll keep reading to learn the answers. After all, no one wants to die with unanswered questions in their mind.

I think this philosophy came to me when I thought about my own reading habits. If I reach the end of the first page, I ask myself, "Do I want to keep reading this story?" If I don't have questions about what's going to happen in the story, the answer may be "No," and I'll find something else to read.

There are always exceptions, of course. If an author is so good she can hold me spellbound with two pages describing wallpaper, I'll stick around for the sheer pleasure of reading superlative writing.

But maybe that's just me. I'd love to know what others think.

Incidentally, if you'd like to know the answers to the questions raised above, both "**Dead Wife Walking**" and "**Baltimore Bounty**" are included in **SHORT STORIES OF EARL STAGGS**, a collection of 16 stories, available in print (\$8.99) or ebook (\$1.99). Details here: <https://earlwstags.wordpress.com/short-story-collection-5/>

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Earl Staggs earned a long list of Five Star reviews for his novels **MEMORY OF A MURDER** and **JUSTIFIED ACTION** and has twice received a Derringer Award for Best Short Story of the Year. He served as Managing Editor of *Futures Mystery Magazine*, as President of the Short Mystery Fiction Society, and is a frequent speaker at conferences and seminars. Website: <http://earlwstags.wordpress.com>