

HOW I HOOK 'EM

Kaye George

I'm a big believer in bringing the reader into the setting as soon as possible. I like to start *in media res* (smack dab in the middle of the action), but that can be disorienting if you have no idea of where you are as a reader.

My goal is to let the reader know WHO's here, WHERE they are, and WHEN the scene is happening. I always attempt to get all five senses into every scene. I can't do that every time, of course, but I try. I'm skipping the sense of SIGHT because every scene has to include that.

Here are some of the ways I try to do all this. The very beginning of *CHOKED*, the first Imogene Duckworthy mystery:

"That's it, Uncle Huey!" Imogene Duckworthy whipped off her apron and flung it onto the slick, stainless steel counter. "I quit!" Her order pad, pencil, even the straws skittered out of their pouches and across the floor. She took a step back, her shoes sticking to the trod-upon-after-lunch debris of squished lettuce, blobs of gravy, and bits of unidentifiable brown stuff.

The speaker, Imogene Duckworthy, is the main character. Starting with her speech and actions intimates that. I hope this passage also tells you she's in a place that serves food and that she's part of the waitstaff. She's the main WHO and Uncle Huey is also important.

Sense: TOUCH (feeling the sticky floor). Maybe HEARING if you hear the things skittering. Going on...

"You can't quit, darlin'," drawled Uncle Huey in that thin, nasal voice that made him seem six inches shorter than his five ten. "You're family." He dipped a scoop of mashers and a ladle of gravy onto a plate and handed it to the cook.

"I'm not working double shifts again next week." Immy hoped she sounded serious. Convincing.

"Well, you'll just have to, won't you? With Xenia quitting on me, you and April are all the waitresses I've got left."

Clem, the cook, piled the hot plate with thick slabs of meatloaf, spooned green beans beside them, and shoved it into April's waiting hands. Immy hadn't eaten lunch yet and the oniony smell of the meatloaf kicked up some saliva. She watched April swing through the double doors and glimpsed the white-washed dining room, full of scarred wooden tables and chairs, almost empty of customers now.

Would she miss this place? Maybe, but she was quitting anyway.

A bit more about Immy. She's going to miss the diner, may even regret quitting. What is the diner? The furniture is old and worn This isn't a high-class place, judging from the food Uncle Huey is getting ready to serve. It's a family diner. That's the specific WHERE.

Senses: I tried to touch your TASTE buds by touching Immy's through the SMELL of the food. You can HEAR Uncle Huey's annoying voice.

Immy pounded her fist on the work counter. Hugh Duckworthy jumped. "No, Uncle Huey. April is all you've got left. And if you'd kept your mitts to yourself, you'd still have Xenia." Immy's hands shook as she snatched her purse and jacket from her cubby, but she succeeded in stomping out the back door of the diner, past the cook and busboy who were staring openmouthed. Aside from troublesome customers, she didn't talk back to people often, even when she wanted to.

Even if Uncle Huey was her father's brother, he was a first class jerk.

In the alley, she paused beside the dumpster. Leaned against the sun-warmed metal. Gulped a big breath of relief. And choked on the stench of rotting vegetables. She moved a little farther from the dumpster for her next breath and collapsed against the brick wall, trembling in the aftermath of her bravery.

A bit more about WHO Immy and Uncle Huey are. Uncle Huey is a bit of a dirty old man. Immy is stubborn and defiant in this scene, but not used to being this way.

Senses: HEARing her pound her fist and stomp out, SMELLing the rotting food in the trash bin, FEELING the warm metal.

Immy closed her eyes and let the Texas sun soak into her upturned face, willing it to calm her. She turned her mind to the future. A purchase was waiting for her in Wymee Falls, but she had no transportation to pick it up. What should she do now? She tried to focus--

"What in the hell got into you, Immy?"

Her eyes flew open at the sound of the deep voice. Baxter, one of Huey's two busboys, emptied a bin of food scraps into the dumpster, plunked it onto the alley paving, and strolled over to stand a couple of feet from her. Her pulse raced at the closeness of his lean, hard body. Damn, that man was handsome.

Immy had had a crush on Baxter Killroy since he started to work in the diner two and a half years ago, even though he was at least ten years older than Immy, mid-thirties.

"I never heard you talk back to the boss like that before."

That lazy smile drew her closer. She pushed off the brick wall and took a step toward him. "Well, I guess I never did before."

"Gotta admire that in a woman. That's spunk, Immy."

Now you know the greater WHERE. This story takes place in Texas. If you're familiar with that state, you might pick up on the fact that there isn't a real place called Wymee Falls. If you know the Wichita Falls area, I hope you can later appreciate the parody I create of the whole area.

You don't know the exact time of year, but it's warm out, so the WHEN is that it's not winter. Actually, in Texas there are only two seasons anyway. Summer, which is about nine or ten months long, and something else that is Not Summer.

One more WHO, Baxter Killroy. Giving his age establishes Immy's. Reading her reaction to him tells you a bit more about her. She's susceptible to a good-looking guy with a deep voice and a hard body.

There's a tiny hint where I'm trying to entice you to read on to learn about her purchase and her future.

Senses: You can HEAR both the plunk of the trash basket and Baxter's voice. You can FEEL the warm sun, the Immy's racing pulse.

You also learn that Immy has never done anything like this before, something you may have suspected, but now know for sure. The opening of the novel is a turning point for her as she embarks on a new venture.

She glowed at his approval, feeling her face flush. She didn't think Baxter had ever thought of her as a woman before. To avoid falling into those deep, dark eyes, she looked over Baxter's shoulder. On the other side of the dumpster stood two pickups, Huey's and Baxter's. An idea formed.

"Say, I have a little problem," she said. "You don't suppose I could borrow your pickup to go into Wymee Falls, do you?"

He shrugged. "Don't see why not. I'm tied up here for awhile. It needs gas. Bring it back full and have it here by closing." He reached into his back jeans pocket and tossed her the keys.

Immy surprised herself by catching them.

"Hey," said Baxter. "You catch pretty good for such a scrawny gal."

Immy's unknown goal is getting more achievable as she asks to borrow the truck.

One more thing to establish right off the bat. That's the mood of the story. This isn't formal writing, and these aren't formal, well-educated people. I hope you can see that there will be humor and tangled family relationships.

If you don't want to read on to find out what happens (what her errand is, what the repercussions of quitting her job will be, and whether or not Baxter will be the romantic interest), my first two pages haven't done their job!



Kaye George, national-best-selling and multiple-award-winning author, writes several series: Imogene Duckworthy, Cressa Carraway (Barking Rain Press), People of the Wind (Untreed Reads), and, as Janet Cantrell, Fat Cat (Berkley Prime Crime cozies). The second, Fat Cat Spreads Out, appears June 2nd. The second Cressa Carraway novel, Requiem in Red, will appear in early 2016. Her short stories appear in anthologies, magazines, and her own collection, A Patchwork of Stories. The next one, "Heartbreak at Graceland," will come out in Memphis Noir in November. She reviews for Suspense Magazine. She lives in Knoxville, TN.

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