

Rapid Orientation through a Layered Approach
by Paula Gail Benson

I write short stories. For me, two pages may be a fifth of the tale I'm telling.

Within the first two pages, I need to introduce the main characters, setting, and situation confronting the protagonist as well as inserting a few hints about how the matter will be resolved. I have to establish relationships and conflict so that readers are already wondering what's going to happen next.

My story, "The Train's on the Tracks," recently published in *FISH OR CUT BAIT: A GUPPY ANTHOLOGY* (Wildside Press, April 2015), takes place on the floor of a State Senate during a filibuster over a controversial bill. Thanks to CSPAN, news programming, and movies, readers have some familiarity with how a legislative chamber looks and what happens during a debate, but this story presents a different perspective from what they are used to viewing.

In the initial scene, the readers become privy to a very private conversation between legislators on the Senate floor -- an action taking place out of camera range and revealing the members' true natures rather than their public personas. A more senior Senator with a poll sheet is pressing a newly elected Senator about how she'll vote on the issue of whether or not to eliminate a state government office with only one employee.

Polling the members is a commonplace action for me. I work for a state legislature and have watched while one member holds the podium and others canvass those listening to the debate to determine whether there are enough votes to force the speaker to sit down and move forward to other matters.

When a reader told me she found the polling Senator offensive, I was surprised. Yet, I was glad she had a strong reaction to Patrick O'Reilly. Patrick, who is identified as the Senator from Shelton County (a unique Senate custom), is pressing his former tutor, new Senator Carolyn Louise "Caro" Mitchell, for an answer. Caro, the POV character, knows what he's doing. She compares his tactics with her memories of him as a student, and she's not intimidated by him, partly because of their history and partly because as a teacher, she needs to hear a good argument to be convinced.

Am I taking a risk bringing background information in so early in the story? Perhaps. But, I'm using it as a contrast to show the dynamic existing between these two very different competing individuals. They have a past, yet that relationship is the undercurrent that tugs and distorts their current decision-making process. Caro formerly kept Patrick, or Paddy Cakes as his mama called him, in line. Now, he's trying to influence her with his seniority. How much time does she have to string him along before she'll be forced to make a choice?

I felt very fortunate that the story call for this anthology required a character to make a difficult decision, to "fish or cut bait." That provided built-in tension. Then, I looked up how "fish or cut

bait” became an expression and discovered another meaning. Initially, it referred to cutting up smaller catches as bait to lure larger fish.

Suddenly, I had my theme. Not everything is as it seems. There are numerous layers with hidden meanings to negotiate. This is a constant battle with legislative issues.

For me, theme helps to propel a story forward. On the surface, it appears to be straight forward legislative debate over whether to get rid of a troublesome state employee. But, beneath, other matters are brewing. By puzzling out what’s amiss or missing, Caro gets to the truth and makes her decision.

In developing the layers, I found myself depending more upon conventions (like recognizing Senators by the county they represent), nick names (like Paddy Cakes), and Caro’s personal opinions about the characters and situation to rapidly orient readers. Through Caro’s assessments (and her voice is the significant, moving factor), readers learn that Patrick still bristles at comments about his overbearing mother; filibustering Senator Hartness champions Louis Musgrove probably because as a political wife she helped her husband recover from scandal; and loose cannon employee Louis Musgrove either took a brilliant calculated risk or made a terrible mistake. And, all this makes readers want to find out if they are in for a smooth journey or a train wreck about to happen.

At least, that’s what I hope. Why don’t you take a look and tell me what you think?

Here are the first two published pages of “The Trains on the Tracks” (with permission from and thanks to Wildside Press):

Patrick O'Reilly, the Senator from Shelton County, stood before my desk in the State Senate chamber holding a tally sheet. He frowned like he did years ago when I used to tutor him in high school math to make my college spending money. Now, God help his clients, he was a CPA.

"So, Senator from Jackson." Paddy addressed me by the county I represented according to Senate custom. He was polling the Senators to see if a majority would vote to end the filibuster on a bill to eliminate the job of a low-level, high profile, irritating public employee. "Do you intend to vote for or against the bastard?"

"Paddy, I know your mama would hate to hear you talk like that." I recently had been elected as the only Independent in the Senate and had no seniority over Paddy, but in our small Southern state, everyone had connections. Old Paddy Cakes would have hell to pay if I told his domineering mama he was using bad language on the Senate floor.

"Damn it, Caro, if Mama had to endure this debate, she'd be talking that way herself. This isn't a college faculty senate meeting where all you do is spend time on meaningless philosophical discussions. It's state government conducting the people's business. We need to make a decision and move on. The train's on the tracks, ready to leave the station. Either get a ticket to ride or wave goodbye."

I paused before replying. As a college theatre professor and playwright, I go by C.L., but I was born Carolyn Louise Mitchell. Usually, people called me Carolyn, but Paddy had reverted

to Caro, my nickname from childhood and among close friends.

"You know..." I had to refrain from calling him Paddy Cakes. "...I'm enjoying learning all this legislative lingo. The train is on the tracks. Buy a ticket to ride or get out of the way. Fish or cut bait."

His eyes gleamed. "Exactly."

"Well, except, that the Senator who told me about cutting bait explained the original meaning wasn't just letting go of the fishing pole."

Paddy rolled his eyes. "Oh, Jeez. I should have known you've been talking with the Senator from Thayer. What did she tell you?"

I glanced beyond Paddy to the short, elegant, gray-bunned woman who had held the Senate podium for the last three hours. Her dulcet tones now underscored my quiet conversation with Paddy.

Emmaline Hartness, representing Thayer County, was a political wife elected to fill her deceased husband's unexpired term and subsequently reelected twice. Senators respected her quiet, forthright demeanor, and her knowledge of where the bodies lay buried and who put them there.

"She said cutting bait used to refer to fishermen slicing up their smaller catches to use as lure for bigger fish. Sort of like me agreeing to vote with you on one issue in hopes that you'll vote with me on another. She called it picking your allies and your battles."

Paddy clenched the tally sheet. "Caro, what she needed to tell you is there's a difference between trading in good faith and trying people's patience. Louis Musgrove's action is an affront to legislative authority."

"Some people call it an innovative approach."

"Well, they're wrong. He should have resigned or been fired by now. If we let him get away with this, any law we pass will be considered a joke. This debate has gone on long enough. The members are ready to go home."

"Then, call the question, Senator from Shelton."

His frown deepened. "Maybe we would if we knew how the votes would fall. Care to enlighten me?"

I rose from my seat, muffling a yawn as I exaggeratedly stretched my arms and legs. "I promise you, Paddy, you'll be the first to know."

Paddy shook his head and glanced at his tally sheet to select his next victim. I pushed my chair under the desk and walked to the center aisle. Gazing back as I neared the door, I saw Emmaline Hartness addressing an almost empty Senate chamber.

"As the people's representatives it's our duty—our sacred obligation—to consider this matter reasonably. To make a determination based on good governmental practices, rather than condemning personalities," she said. Her purple tapestry jacket had a standing collar that framed her face. I knew she wore comfortable tennis shoes hidden behind the podium. She had prepared to argue through the night to defeat the bill eliminating the Family Services Coordinating Council's public affairs office. An office with one employee, Mr. Louis Musgrove.

Last year, the legislature prohibited the state's medical centers from dispensing a non-hallucinogenic oil made from cannabis. That oil provided the only cure for Zara, a child dying from uncontrolled seizures. Zara's grandmother appealed to Louis and he used a significant portion of his public service announcements' budget to film a movie about Zara's plight. Then, he booked it in theatres, charging admission to raise money for Zara and her family

to travel to Colorado, where the treatment was legal. Unfortunately, Zara died before making the trip.



A legislative attorney and former law librarian, Paula Gail Benson's short stories have been appeared in *Kings River Life*, the *Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*, *Mystery Times Ten 2013* (Buddhapuss Ink), *A Tall Ship, a Star, and Plunder* (Dark Oak Press and Media 2014), *A Shaker of Margaritas: That Mysterious Woman* (Mozark Press 2014), and *Fish or Cut Bait: a Guppy Anthology* (Wildside Press 2015). She regularly blogs with others about writing mysteries at the Stiletto Gang and Writers Who Kill. Her personal blog is Little Sources of Joy and her website is <http://paulagailbenson.com>.