

Hooks With A Purpose

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Readers of historical mysteries like myself enjoy nothing better than being transported from our mundane twenty-first century existences into the exotic realms of the past. We're huge suckers for the transportive power of the classic fairy tale opening of "once upon a time" merged with the immediacy of "one day" when something happens to change everything. So that's the effect I strove to create in the opening lines of my Joseph Haydn mystery, *A Minor Deception*:

On a chilly December morning in the year 1766, the inhabitants of the little town of Eisenstadt bustle about in a state of feverish anticipation. Eisenstadt might be no different from any other obscure free town in Royal Hungary; too insignificant to merit a spot on the postal route. Nevertheless, it has drawn the attention of the entire Empire upon itself.

The widowed Empress Maria Theresa is to grace the little town in her Hungarian domains with a visit in three weeks, bringing to an end a year-long period of mourning for her beloved husband.

But the man whom the town credits for this remarkable event is at this very moment beginning to fear something might go amiss in the weeks to come.

The passage is written in present tense, conveying a palpable sense of immediacy not possible with the past tense. The opening paragraph modulates into the voice of the townspeople. Yes, Eisenstadt might be the eighteenth century equivalent of the boondocks, but it's still important enough for the Empress to visit—coming out of mourning to do so, no less.

Each paragraph sets up a question that's answered in the next. The section ends with a sense of foreboding that poses the biggest question: why and by what means might things go horribly wrong with the imperial visit? It's a question that keeps you reading.

This opening section is also deliberately succinct. Narrative summary is usually frowned upon—and with good reason—in contemporary storytelling. Another more pragmatic consideration is that I wanted to be able to get the first two scenes within the first five pages, since that's the minimum an agent will ask you to include with your query.

Like an overture to an opera, the opening paragraphs set up the central theme of the main story. And it crescendos into the next section:

The sound of two violins, a cello, and a bass playing a section from a string quartet wafted out from the open window of the Music Room of the Esterházy Castle. Franz Joseph Haydn—resplendent in his livery of blue and gold—waved his baton. He was still waving it when the music came to an abrupt close.

"No, Bartó! No!" Haydn shook his head, baton still suspended in mid-air. "The phrase continues there. Your solo begins on that note." He tapped the sheet music on the ornate silver stand in front of him with his baton.

The expression on the faces of Haydn's second violinist, the bearded cellist, and the youthful, blond bass player mirrored his own exasperation. They had played the same phrase twenty times at least, and his principal violinist, Bartó Daboczi, had made the same mistake every time.

Bartó put his violin down, his thin lips compressed into a stubborn line. "Herr Kapellmeister, I do not understand."

Quite forgetting he was wearing a wig, Haydn dragged his hand through its locks, pushing it so it sat askew on his head. God grant him patience! At this rate, they would never be ready for the imperial visit.

"What is it you fail to understand, Bartó?" Haydn strove to keep his voice down. The Estates Director, hearing their voices raised in argument earlier, had already availed himself of one opportunity to read them a lecture on decorum. Haydn was determined not to give him any more such opportunities.

"Why must this new phrase begin here, Herr Kapellmeister?" Bartó jabbed an irate finger at the score. "It is the middle of the measure."

Ah! A classic case of conflict—both internal and external. Haydn, who has his hands full with the imperial visit, has to contend with an argumentative violinist. Keeping him on pins and needles pits him against his superior, the Estates Director. And Bartó also seems to have gotten under the skin of at least one other musician:

The cellist and the bass player muttered impatiently. But Lorenzo, the second violinist, had clearly reached the end of his tether.

"Ach, you dolt!" he growled, taking the music off the stand. He held the score before his colleague, and prodded at the offending note. "Don't you see your solo develops the theme from the section before in which we all play together?"

Bartó was on his feet in an instant. "Whom do you think you're calling a dolt, you idiot, you!" He thrust his face close to the second violinist, his clenched fist inches away from the other man's jaw. "What can you know of composition, you talent-less donkey?"

"That is enough, Bartó!" Haydn braced himself against the principal violinist, shocked the two men should have come so easily to blows.

Amateur sleuth mysteries often open with trouble brewing. *Murder, She Wrote* and the Poirot mysteries when the detective is on vacation present classic examples. Conflict of this kind draws attention and sets up a mystery where none might be expected.

But a hook must do more than draw the reader in. It needs to serve a purpose: further plot, present characters and give you a flavor of their world. Otherwise, it's just an empty hook that won't sustain the reader beyond the first couple of pages. The story also needs to continue to move forward. You can't hook your reader with a body in the freezer only to dial back the action

with details of the protagonist's backstory. I deliberately chose to begin at the point where Bartó's actions grow too outrageous for Haydn to ignore.

But each section, even the overture, serves a purpose. The overture lets you know there's a lot riding on the imperial visit via the juxtaposition of two tidbits: the insignificance of the town versus the importance of the event to take place.

Bartó is just the kind of disagreeable person who does something—or has something done to them—to trigger a chain of events resulting in the precipitating incident. His character informs the way people respond to him. The first scene not only shows you in miniature the challenges a Kapellmeister—Director of Music—faces on a daily basis, but serves to present Haydn as an effective leader.

He knows when to assert himself and when to back off when dealing with a recalcitrant musician ("H[aydn] took a deep breath, aware that his second violinist was staring at him, expecting him to hold his ground. But the Kapellmeister had no desire to continue the argument."). He can keep order among his musicians, ensuring they work together as a team; he helps with rehearsals. These details prepare us for his taking on the role of Kapell-detective.

And there are questions that arise: Why doesn't Haydn fire his violinist? What will Bartó do next? How will it affect the imperial visit? And how will Haydn deal with his antics to ensure the Empress's visit goes without a mishap? If I've done my job well, you'll want to keep reading to find out.



A former journalist, Nupur Tustin now divides her time between composing music and writing mysteries—and caring for her two mischievous toddlers, Rena and Gunner. She has worked for Reuters and CNBC, and published diverse freelance articles, short stories, and academic research in the fields of Communication and English. A member of Sisters in Crime, she writes a regular column, *AgentInsight*, for the SinC Guppies chapter newsletter, *First Draft*. Her sheet music and blog are available at <http://ntustin.musicaneo.com>. *A Minor Deception* is the first in her Joseph Haydn mystery series.