

## The First Two Pages of *Medallion of the Undead* Anthony Rudzki

I joined the Fantasy\_Writing group on Yahoo in June of 2009. I had always thought about writing and the challenge of putting pen to paper and producing a novel. Something with compelling characters, a suspenseful plot and cliffhanging chapters that would make my readers take a quick look at the clock in the post-midnight light and continue on. I hadn't written in years...Hell, the last time that I was even a little serious about writing was in high school and that was, well, do you remember 5 1/4 inch floppy disks? I joined the group to knock off the rust and see if the spark of creating entertaining stories was still there, hidden somewhere. So, I began to write. Weekly writing challenges provided the theme and a schedule for submitting short works to the group for comments. The feedback helped me improve my skills and I loved that group.

Did I also mention how the group pissed me off to no end? No?

So, back in the day, the turn over rate in Yahoo groups was worse than a Burger King during summer vacation. There were the anchor crew of course, of which I was one, but we were constantly welcoming new members and after one or two posts, they would disappear or worse, they would submit the most god-awful collections of English words ever strung together. Mostly without punctuation. Or carriage returns. It was-

Wait. Why was I telling you this story?

Right. Okay, so even worse than the submitted atrocities inflicted upon the English language, these new people began to crit (criticize) the weekly challenges, with only syrupy sweet feedback. "You're doing a great job!" or "I only see one or two things to tweak, otherwise awesome." And they said this about disasters in writing. Complete train wrecks. So I became frustrated and wanted to leave the group and find another one that would give good, critical feedback and help me better my writing, like in the old days. Well, before I could leave, Yahoo re-wrote some software, crashed the group forum and Fantasy\_Writing was no more.

So what does all this have to do with the first two-pages? Good question. Wait. The high turn-over rate. So, with the constant stream of new people joining, the same questions were being asked over and over. One of the more popular ones was "Are you married?", but I digress. One of the more popular ones was "How do I know where to start a story?" The usual answer was "At the beginning. You'll just know where the story needs to start." Which didn't really answer the question. The one thing that everyone knew, however, was that the opening of your story needed to grab the reader by the throat and never let go. It had to be compelling.

So, I told you that story, to tell you this one.

When I wrote the outline for "Medallion of the Undead", I wanted a story that involved a common farmer boy leading a simple life, who, through circumstances, unearths a 300 year old curse, thrusting him into the middle of it all.

Great idea, huh? Simple farm boy. I started like this:

The thunder boomed again causing Kyle to instinctively cringe and take his eyes off the flooded fields that was his family's farm. With a mumbled curse, he returned his gaze out the speckled window and scanned the bare muddy mounds, beaten down by the Twenty Year Seasonals. They're torrential rains that last 6 days, cleansing the earth and providing plenty of water for our wells, his father had explained. The rains were now on their tenth day and showed no sign of stopping.

His father was out there, checking the damage in the Northern fields, but they had both resigned themselves to the fact that this year's crop was rotting beneath the surface of the water-logged farmland.

He had never seen such an unending string of rain-filled days, but the Seasonals didn't run like the clockworks, his father told him several nights earlier as they sat at the dining table finishing the last of the cider. You couldn't predict them, so you planted your crop and hoped for the best. Hoped that they would hold off one more season.

They had held off until two weeks past his seventeenth birthday.

Kyle turned at the sound of the latch being raised on the front door. His father stepped inside, shutting the door behind him and keeping the blowing rain at bay. Stomping his feet, he pulled his waterproofed coat off, shook it and hung it on the hook behind the door. Kyle returned his view out onto the fields once again.

"Daydreaming about your girl again?"

Not gripping. Interesting perhaps, but probably not enough to make someone flipping through the pages say, "Yes, I want to see where this goes."

What to do? I kept thinking back to that old advice about knowing where the story starts, but that seemed to slam head-first into the mundane life of Kyle. I wanted Kyle to be mundane, but he needed a hook of some kind. So I did what most writers do and ignored the problem. I continued to write and when I got to 90K words, I decided that was enough for one day and stopped typing.

Actually, I got to about 70K words and wrote a scene that was pure monologue and described a plot to ensure that a secret (three secrets actually) was kept. The description involved skulduggery and betrayal and seemed interesting enough that, while it might not grab you by the throat, it would grab you around the ankle and refuse all efforts to be shaken off. Less like a literary classic and more like a dog in heat.

So I wrote the scene of an agent sent out to hide one of the cursed artifacts. I made it the prologue and rescued the somewhat bland original beginning (that I couldn't make exciting), and hopefully made the reader think "Wow, I wonder where this is leading?"

Let's check it out:

Devane pulled the heavy wool cloth over his shoulders and moved a little closer to the fire. He looked skyward and thanked the gods that the weather had finally cleared.

A long week of rain and cold weather with nothing to do but wait. Wait, and keep a fire burning during the night just in case.

“You asked for this assignment,” he whispered to himself as he finished the last piece of the scrawny rabbit he had caught earlier. Wiping his greasy fingers on his pants, he tossed the bones into the fire and watched the sparks fly and listened to the soft crackling of the fat being consumed.

He ran his finger over the small shoulder patch for the Guild of the Silver Dagger on the tunic that he wore. He slid down the log he sat on and leaned against it, making himself as comfortable as he could, and dozed off into a light sleep.

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Devane was immediately aware and scanning the dark forest around him, his hand on the hilt of his short sword. Faintly, he heard the whisper that had woke him.

“Guild of the Silver Dagger?” Came from the darkness of the forest.

Devane scrambled to his feet, casting off the blanket and drew his sword. He held it out, pointing toward the forest and the direction of the voice he had heard.

“Show yourself,” he said.

The bushes on the edge of camp, on the far side of the fire rustled and then a young man dressed in beggar’s clothes stepped out. His face was dirty, his clothes torn and ragged and he looked to be unarmed.

“Sulstan!” Devane cried and leapt across the small fire and hugged his friend, almost bowling him over from the excitement of the meeting.

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Sulstan sat near the fire, a knife and fork in his hands and a metal plate heaped with meat, vegetables and soft white bread. He cut into the food and shoveled it into his mouth, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

“I’m sorry, I forgot the butter for the bread,” Devane said.

Between bites, Sulstan waved his friend off, “Butter? I’m just grateful for all this.” He put another forkful in his mouth.

“It’s for a job well done. You hid it just as you were instructed and no one knows of its location, correct?”

“No one. I did-” Sulstan started to reply and then stopped. He dropped the plate, which overturned in the weeds near the fire and grabbed his throat. He fell to his knees and slumped over onto the ground and was still.

Devane didn't move for a long time, only looking at the lifeless body of the Guard for the Guild of the Silver Daggers, and his best friend since childhood. When he finally moved, it was all business, a plan that he had gone over in his mind over and over as he waited for his friend to arrive.

Fortunately, Sulstan only carried a small bag containing another set of threadbare clothes, some dried food and a small bottle of wine. Devane searched his pockets and found them empty. He removed Sulstan's boots and under the lining, he found what he dreaded.

Opening his own pack, he removed a bottle of a foul smelling liquid and poured it liberally over Sulstan's body. When the bottle was empty, he dropped it on the ground. Taking a burning ember from the fire, he tossed it on his friend and his body burst into flames. The fire burned with an intensity that drove him back several steps and the heat washed over him.

Devane took a quick glance at the parchment he recovered and tossed the map into the fire. It flared and disappeared in curled glowing ash. Thick smoke rose up through the trees in the still air and Devane remained motionless until a gust of wind blew the smoke in his direction, forcing him to his knees, vomiting in the brush, tears streaming down his face.

Before sunrise, Devane abandoned the campsite and headed back towards the Guild to report his assignment complete.

Now the interesting thing is that if the reader is paying attention, he will recognize the prologue when he gets most of the way through the book and will find out what happens to Devane, our faithful servant, who was willing to murder his friend for a cause.

So, what have we learned? We've learned never to allow me to tell a story. More importantly, we have learned that the author has plenty of tools in his toolbox which he can use to make something as trivial as the opening scene of a sopping wet farmboy, into something that makes you, at least, read on for a little while.

And after all, isn't that what we want the curious reader to do with our novels in the bookstore?



Medallion of the Undead is Anthony Rudzki's first novel, published by Solstice publishing. Prior to that, he was published in "Winter's night Magazine" Issue #2 and "365 days of Flash Fiction". He's currently working on a number of other projects and has been the Coordinator for the Short Mystery Fiction Society's Derringer Awards for the last 3 years. He's on Twitter at @GroupOfFour and blogs at [www.theundeadtrilogy.com](http://www.theundeadtrilogy.com)