

TROY/The first two pages

Character, Setting, Problem  
Mark Troy

*The Maltese Falcon* opens with a quick description of Sam Spade ("a blond satan" and "steep, rounded slope of his shoulders"), followed by the arrival of a visitor. The visitor is Miss Wonderly. We get a brief description of her, some telling details of Spade's office (the limp cigarettes in the ash tray and the flecks of ash on his desk) and then Miss Wonderly begins to explain the problem that brought her to Spade. All of this occurs quickly. By the end of the second page, we have characters, setting, and problem.

*The Big Sleep* opens with a description of Phillip Marlowe ("powder blue suit," "black wook socks with dark blue clocks on them." "clean, shaved and sober") approaching General Sternwood's mansion. We get some description of the Sternwood mansion and then we meet a young woman, Sternwood's daughter, who is a little tipsy and a lot manipulative. We don't yet know why Marlowe was summoned to Sternwood's, but we know the daughter is a problem, if not the problem. Once again, we have character, setting and problem by the end of the second page.

The detective in his/her, often shabby, office meeting a client for the first time, or the detective visiting the client in the client's home or business are common openings for a private detective story. The reader sees the detective in their natural world and knows that soon the detective will be yanked from that world into something very different.

Character, setting and problem. Spade's character is limned by the setting of his office. Marlowe's character is revealed in the contrast with the setting of the Sternwood mansion. The problem is presented to Spade by another character, his client. For Marlowe, the problem is presented by the client's daughter. For both detectives, the problem is more than what they are asking the detective to solve, it's what they represent, something unattainable.

*The Splintered Paddle* is a private eye story, so I began it with those three elements—character, setting and problem.

*I was punching air on Kaimana Beach in Waikiki when the working girl found me. From her appearance, I didn't guess she was a working girl. College student, maybe. Ten or twelve years younger than me, wearing a two-piece suit that revealed a body toned from youth rather than discipline. Her suit was no skimpier than the costume worn by perhaps a dozen other women at the beach. No skimpier than my own two-piece. A broad-brimmed straw hat hid most of her face in shadow.*

*I threw a set of left/right straight punches followed by left/right roundhouse combinations.*

*She stopped a few feet beyond the reach of my jabs. "Ava Rome?"*

*I continued the workout, counting each punch out loud. "—fifteen, sixteen—"*

*"Moon Ito told me I'd find you here."*

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Ava Rome is the character, a detective, like Spade and Marlowe, but unlike Spade and Marlowe, a woman. We know that from her two-piece swimsuit. Just as Hammett gave us a quick description of Spade and Chandler of Marlowe, this opening paragraph gives a quick description of Ava, who is a little older than her visitor, but who is young enough and confident enough in her body to wear a swimsuit with its implied skimpiness. Ava is shown in her natural world, practicing martial arts on a beach in Waikiki.

The woman, whose name is Jenny Mordan, brings a problem. We don't know what the problem is, yet, but Ava thinks it's important because Moon Ito, someone whom Ava seems to respect, sent her. By the end of the second page, the reader knows Jenny wants to hire Ava to protect her.

*She fell into step beside me. "He said you protect the defenseless. That it's your calling."*

*Protecting the defenseless was once the law of the nation of Hawaii before annexation. Kamehameha The Great's first law, the law of the splintered paddle, is still ingrained in the spirit of the islands and her people. It's on my business card, right below "Licensed Private Investigator." The defenseless shall be guaranteed protection from harm.*

*"It's my business, not a calling. Nuns have callings. That's not me."*

*"Too right about that. How many nuns shadow-box in a swimsuit under the eyes of the local Tom, Dick and Kimos?"*

Now the reader knows the problem that gets Ava into the story. We know her motivation—protecting the defenseless. Even though she says it's not her calling, we have the sense that she protests too much.

One more thing we learn by the end of the second page is that the problem and Ava's motivation, is a unique part of the setting, Hawaii.

Character, setting, problem.

But wait a minute. if you read *The Splintered Paddle*, you won't find this on the first two pages. You'll find this in the second chapter. This is not the way the book begins.

It is, however, the way the book began during most of its pre-publication development. It began this way through about fifteen drafts. Although the beginning improved with each revision, it still seemed to lack something. That something was the story problem. The story problem wasn't big enough. Jenny's problem is not the main problem in the story, and Jenny herself doesn't make it to the end of the story (sorry for the spoiler).

The main story problem appeared in the second chapter in the form of a character named Norman Traxler. This is where the advice of smarter people comes in. More than one agent and editor to whom I submitted the book, thought it should begin with chapter two. I pondered that and eventually took their advice. I switched the chapters.

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I don't know if it would have sold quicker, had I made the switch sooner, but once I did make the switch, the book got more interest. I was a little fearful at first. This is, after all, a mystery. By switching the chapters, I was naming the bad guy in the very first sentence. Clearly this story is not a who dunnit.

What does changing the chapters add to the story? The new first chapter introduces the bad guy and a larger problem. It also gives the story a darker tone. Instead of opening on a sunny beach, we open in a nondescript kitchen.

*Norman Traxler entered his host's kitchen and booted up his host's computer. He stepped over the guy's outstretched legs to reach the refrigerator.*

*"How ya doin', Gerald? Got any beer in here?" He took a can of Budweiser and looked down at Gerald Tobin who stared up at him from the floor with frightened eyes.*

The dark tone is established in the first two sentences by the ironic use of "host" to describe a guy who is stretched out on the floor. We soon learn something about Traxler. He's a nasty piece of work.

*"Good choice, Gerald. Had you pegged for a micro-brewery fag." He opened the can and took a long swallow.*

*Gerald Tobin whimpered through the tape over his mouth. More tape bound his arms behind him and held his legs together. He sat on the floor, his back against the kitchen cabinets. A towel around his head turned pink with blood that seeped from a gash above his temple.*

*"Ever peep at your neighbors, Gerald? The twist across the way's got some looks to her."*

By now, the reader knows that Traxler views people as objects (fag, twist) to be disposed of, probably with violence, if they get in his way. In the next paragraph, we learn the identity of the "twist" and that Traxler's interest in her is more than casual.

*Even from a cell in San Quentin, Traxler had kept track of Ava Rome. The way he did it, he'd find some fresh-faced kid that just processed in. The fear of an outlaw biker or an Aryan brother taking a shine to his asshole would be coming off the kid in waves. He'd offer the fish a cigarette, show him he's a stand-up guy who'll take care of him. They all had contacts on the outside—wives, girlfriends, family.*

*At the right time, he'd bring the matter up. Got this niece, he'd call her, who's embarrassed by him, making her own life in the Army. Just want to know she's doing okay. Maybe the fish could have his old lady check her out. The information they'd come back with you wouldn't believe. The things a man wouldn't do to protect his shitter. He knew when she was promoted, changed duty assignments, when she got transferred to Schofield in Hawaii and when she left the Army a few years later.*

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We haven't met Ava yet, but we know she has a big problem. She is being stalked. The stalking has gone on for a dozen years. By the end of the second page, we see how his tactics have changed and gotten more dangerous until until this point. When we do finally meet Ava in the next chapter, that tropical beach setting is darkened in shadow. The reader knows a storm is about to break over her head. I had not changed any words, I'd only switched the order of the chapters.

I knew that beginning a book this way posed some risks. *The Splintered Paddle* is a private detective story, but it doesn't begin like one. It starts with the problém, not character or setting. Unlike classic detective stories, we don't meet the detective until later, after we've met the bad guy. This is a risk because readers want to know with whom they will be taking the ride when they begin a book. I think the appeal of a detective story is that the readers know they are taking the ride with someone trustworthy, someone who, even though flawed, will see them safely to the end. In *The Splintered Paddle*, they don't get that assurance. By the time they meet the detective, there is some doubt that she will take them safely to the end.

I expected some push back and I got it. One agent thought that made it a hard sell and one reader told me they couldn't get past the first chapter. One reviewer thought the bad guy's point of view was unnecessary.

I could have made the first chapter a prologue, which would have allowed readers to skip it, but I decided that Traxler's character and motivation is an important part of the story. Again, in a departure from the classic detective story, Traxler's point of view does appear in several other places through out the story.

Although I had some pushback, on the whole, the story found acceptance, starting with my editor at Five Star and including most reviewers. One reviewer labeled the story Hawaiian Noir. It's not my term, but I embrace it because that's exactly what I had in mind. All because I switched the order of the first two chapters.



Mark Troy writes "Hawaiian noir" stories featuring Ava Rome, a tough minded *wahine* private eye who walks the mean streets of a paradise tourists seldom see. Mark is a former Peace Corps volunteer (Thailand) and a graduate of the University of Hawaii, now succumbing to Polynesian Paralysis in Texas. He is a marathoner, cyclist, and former skydiver who, when not spilling blood on paper, mixes tiki cocktails and plays gunfighter ballads on a ukulele.  
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