

ANTAGONIZING THE PROTAGONIST

by John M. Floyd

One of my favorite quotes about writing came from author Margaret Lucke. She said, “You can’t protect your characters—the words protagonist and antagonist have ‘agony’ built in.” She was right. Especially about the protagonist. As fiction writers, one of our primary goals should be to heap a heavy load of misery onto the shoulders of our hero or heroine, and to do it as soon as possible.

As my friend Paula Benson said, in her post at this blog several weeks ago, the content of those “first two pages” is especially meaningful to her because she’s a writer of short stories. (Me too, Paula.) She mentioned that two pages, for her, might be a fifth of the story. For me, it might be even more: most of the mysteries I’ve written for *Woman’s World* are three pages *total*. So yes, a writer of shorts has to get things moving fast. That can be done several ways, but one of the best is to quickly introduce a threat—hopefully a big threat—to your protagonist. Put him or her in agony.

A few months ago I was honored to have one of my stories selected as a finalist for the Edgar Award. Alas, it did not win; Gillian Flynn’s did. (What’s *she* doing writing short stories, anyway?) But my nominated story, “200 Feet,” which appeared last year in *The Strand Magazine*, was typical of what we’ve been talking about here, because I tried to pack into its first two pages a lot of discomfort for my hero. The protagonist was a cop, and even though his job is often dangerous anyhow, I wanted his situation at the start of this story to be downright terrifying. How did I do that? Well, I put him in a fix that, if I’d been there, would have been

terrifying for *me*—and hopefully for the reader as well. I had him crawl through a window onto a narrow ledge two-thirds of the way up a thirty-story building.

Yes, things got even worse after that. They're supposed to, in a good story. I heard once that the only three steps a fiction writer needs to remember are (1) force man up a tree, (2) throw rocks at man, and (3) get man down again. The size of the rocks is what can make a mediocre story good and a good story great—but even before you start making things unbearable for your hero, you first have to get him out of his comfort zone. Whether it's up a tree or in deep water or out on a ledge.

Here are the first two pages of my story, “200 Feet”:

Terry Gibbs could remember a thousand unpleasant duties in the course of his twelve years on the police force. He had searched drug dens, worked freeway accidents, nursed drunks, dug cars out of snowdrifts, even handled dead bodies. But never had he wanted to do anything as little as he wanted to climb out the window on the twentieth floor of the Ravenwood Tower that afternoon in late May. The fact was, he didn't have much choice. In the immortal words of Buffalo Bill's stable boy, it's a dirty job but somebody's gotta do it.

The jumper, when Officer Gibbs gathered his courage and took off his uniform jacket and crawled out the window and saw her, looked as unlikely as he was to be perched on the ledge of a thirty-story building. Short, young, brunette, sweater, jeans, sneakers. She looked like a staffer for a local politician, maybe, or the lady behind the counter at one of those upscale fitness centers. Except for her face. Even in profile it looked tired, and sad, and—worst of all, in a situation like this—determined. Gibbs studied her a moment, then turned his attention to his surroundings. Specifically, to the placement of his feet.

He was careful not to look down. He didn't have to; he knew the city was spread out below him in grays and browns and greens like a satellite image. He just kept his eyes level, eased himself up to his full height of five foot seven, and crept toward her along the two-foot-wide concrete ledge. The afternoon was warm, sunny, and—thank you, God—windless.

Both the woman and Gibbs had their backs pressed tight against the side of the building. He stopped three feet from where she was standing.

She had chosen her spot well. Directly between them was a four-inch vertical drainpipe that would make it tough for a would-be rescuer to grab her. It was painted white like the ledge and anchored with iron brackets that left a wide space between the pipe and the wall. The thought of her having stepped around it set off a new flurry of butterflies in Gibbs's already queasy stomach. He could feel his knees trembling.

Without turning to look at him, she said, “You don't want to come any closer.”

Gibbs drew a shaky breath. "I didn't want to come this far."
She actually smiled a little. "You didn't volunteer?" she asked. "Please let me go out and talk to the crazy woman on the ledge?"
"I don't like heights. I volunteered after my captain told me to."
"Your captain?" She still hadn't looked in his direction.
"My boss's boss, in civilian terms. He's one of those inside, waiting to see what happens out here. He doesn't like me much."
"Apparently not. In any case, you can go back and tell him you're both wasting your time."
"So," he said. "You've made up your mind?"
She leaned her head against the bricks and turned to face him for the first time. Their eyes met, looking at each other through the space between the drainpipe and the building. Twenty floors below—two hundred feet—he could hear the honk and rumble of traffic.



John Floyd's work has appeared in *Writer's Digest*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and more than 200 other publications. A former Air Force captain and IBM systems engineer, John won a Derringer Award in 2007 and was nominated for an Edgar in 2015. One of his recent stories was selected by Otto Penzler and guest editor James Patterson for inclusion in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2015*, to be released in October. John is also the author of five books: *Rainbow's End* (2006), *Midnight* (2008), *Clockwork* (2010), *Deception* (2013), and *Fifty Mysteries* (2014). Visit him at www.johnmfloyd.com.