

Starting with the Bad Guy

B.K. Stevens

Usually, in the opening pages of a whodunit, we have to hide our bad guys— make them look harmless, blend them into a pool of red herrings, or keep them out of sight altogether. The plot of my recently released young adult mystery, *Fighting Chance*, offered me a rare opportunity to put my killer at the center right from the beginning. To start building an ominous tone from the first sentence—it felt irresistibly tempting. But whenever we start with the bad guy, we face special challenges, and we have tough decisions to make.

With this book, at least I didn't have to worry about spoiling the suspense. After all, the back cover of *Fighting Chance* reveals that Bobby Davis kills the protagonist's coach during a sparring match at a tae kwon do tournament. By the end of first chapter, the reader has watched the match, has seen the coach fall to the floor when Davis crushes his larynx with a quick, powerful spinning hook kick. The protagonist has seen it, too, and so have about three hundred spectators. So the killer's identity is hardly a secret. The only questions are whether the killing is accidental and whether Davis is the only person involved. Even minimally savvy mystery readers will immediately know that of course the killing is no accident, and of course Davis can't be the only villain—a whodunit is no fun if we can confidently point to the "who" by the end of Chapter One.

In one sense, then, I didn't have much to lose by focusing on Davis in the first sentences. Or maybe I did. Years ago, I read an article by a mystery writer—I wish I could remember which one—arguing it's always a mistake to begin with the killer, since the inside of a killer's head isn't a pleasant place to be. That's a good point. And if the bad guy dominates the opening pages, those pages might not do their crucial work of establishing the protagonist's character and voice, of introducing readers to his or her world, and of hinting at the novel's themes. As I worked on the first two pages of *Fighting Chance*, I tried to find ways around those problems.

Here are the opening paragraphs:

From the minute he walked out to the center of the gym, something about him felt wrong.

Not that he looked all that intimidating. He was Bobby Davis, the announcer said, from Kelly's Dojo in Richmond. He seemed about the same age as Coach Colson—mid twenties—but was several inches shorter, with sort of a baby face and hair this weird dark orange, slicked back hard from his forehead and combed to a precise point at the back of his neck. He dyes his hair, I thought, and every morning he must work in a ton of mousse and comb for ten minutes straight. And his black belt wasn't tied right—just a bulky double knot, instead of the tight, neat square Coach always insisted on.

So it wasn't the way he looked that bothered me. The thing was, he didn't stretch out at all. He just planted his feet shoulder-width apart, folded his arms over his chest, and stood there watching Coach, his mouth twisting in a half-smile, half-smirk. That's dumb, I thought. Everybody should warm up before a sparring match. This guy definitely should. He'd barely won his first two fights, and Coach had aced both of his. So why was Davis taking it easy, looking smug?

I wanted the opening description of Davis to be threatening, but not in obvious ways. So I made him shorter than Coach Colson, I gave him "sort of a baby face," and I included indications he's vain about his personal appearance—not the sort of person we're likely to imagine when we picture a thug. He doesn't seem eager to fight, either, since he's not warming up, and the sloppy knot on his black belt suggests a laid-back, casual attitude. He looks like a pushover.

Not to my protagonist, seventeen-year-old Matt Foley. Even though I wanted to begin with Bobby Davis, I decided it was important to have Davis seen from Matt's perspective. That way, the reader never goes inside the killer's mind—an unpleasant place to be, as the mystery writer who wrote that article noted. And Davis is a more mysterious figure if we see what he does but don't know why he does it or how he feels about it. Even more important, from the first sentence, I wanted to put the emphasis on Matt.

I hope Matt's personality shines through these first three paragraphs. He sees himself as a jock—he's often bored with school, he's not at all bookish, and he's not exactly tolerant of men who dye their hair or spend much time combing it. But he's smarter than he realizes. He's observant. He notices discrepancies between the way things are and the way they should be, notices everything from an improperly tied black belt to a fighter who doesn't bother to warm up even though he's barely survived his first two matches. Less perceptive people might not pick up on such details at all, or might dismiss them as insignificant or even reassuring. Matt realizes they're troubling. If you called him a critical thinker, Matt would scoff—but you'd be right. He's up to the task of being a detective, though he's never thought of himself that way.

In these first paragraphs, I also struggled to get Matt's voice right. From the moment I started toying with the idea of writing this novel, I knew that would be difficult. Matt is male, he's a teenager, and he's obsessed with sports. I am, to put it mildly, none of those things. I didn't want to make Matt sound like a grandmotherly English professor, but I also didn't want to lace his statements with slang that might go out of date before the book made it past the printer. So his vocabulary and speech patterns are informal ("sort of," "this weird dark orange," "the thing is," "that's dumb"), and he slips naturally into the sort of youthful hyperbole I often hear from students ("and every morning he must work in a ton of mousse and comb for ten minutes straight"). But I didn't want to make his language colloquial in a trite, easy way. (Recently, at Bouchercon, I was on a panel with high-school students who made fun of the dialogue they've seen in some YA

mysteries. They offered a sample—“OMG, you guys! He’s, like, dead!” I hope that was youthful hyperbole, not an actual quotation from a book they’d read.)

As the first two pages continued, I tried to broaden the focus. The bad guy, Bobby Davis, is still a definite presence. But now I wanted to help readers picture the scene in the gym and to give them a fuller sense of the situation and, especially, of Matt’s character and perspective:

Coach wasn’t taking it easy. He was swinging his arms, rolling his shoulders, shaking his legs. He can’t wait to get started, I thought. Well, that’s typical Coach. On either side of them, in the other two masking-tape circles we’d marked on the floor last night, little kids and middle-school students traded kicks and punches while referees tried to keep them from hurting each other. Floor judges watched from their folding chairs, and parents crowded in with video cameras, shouting encouragement. Coach paused to catch his breath, turned to us with a grin, and started bouncing in place.

I sat on the home-team bench with the other five members of the Ridgecrest High martial arts club, waiting for the match to begin. Derrick turned to me and frowned.

“Damn, Matt,” he said. “Why is he even out there? The other coaches aren’t competing. And the way he’s jumping up and down—he’s acting like a kid.”

I lifted a shoulder. “It’s his first chance to compete as a black belt, and it’s the first tournament the school’s ever hosted. Naturally he’s excited. Me, too. I never thought we’d draw this many people.”

I glanced around the gym—over a hundred competitors, most in white uniforms, some in black, a few in red or dark blue. At least twice that many spectators crowded the bleachers, cheering while they shoveled down popcorn and nachos from the concession stands. We’d drawn people from as far away as Lynchburg, Coach had said, even a guy from Roanoke.

Berk sat forward on the bench, his fingers tapping against his knees, his whole body bristling with excitement, like an electrical current was running clear through him and his skull might light up any minute. “Coach shouldn’t have any problem winning this one. It’s almost too bad. I wanted him to get at least one real fight, so we could see what he’s like when he’s up against someone good. This guy can’t do anything but block.”

“And kick,” Joseph said. “His front kicks—those are very fast.”

“But they don’t have much power,” I said. “They seem to be his only kicks, too, and he doesn’t use his hands enough. He didn’t try a single combination. Plus he always seems a little off balance, and he shies away from close contact. Black belts should be more aggressive. They should have more moves they can draw on.”

“Like you’d know,” Derrick said, and snorted. “So you’re top belt now. So what? You think that makes you an expert?”

Derrick still hadn’t gotten over it that I’d been promoted to green belt at our last testing, and he hadn’t. “Top belt in a six-person club is no big deal,” I said, “and obviously I’m no expert. All I’m saying is, Davis scored all his points with last-minute front kicks. For a black belt, that seems pretty limited.”

I hope these paragraphs offer a clear contrast between villain and victim: Bobby Davis standing smug, arms folded against his chest, smirking because he knows he can kill his opponent without breaking a sweat; Coach Colson bouncing, swinging his arms, grinning with the excitement of competition. I hope the contrast makes the scene more poignant. We know what’s coming—we read about it on the back cover, or in the Amazon summary—but I hope the contrast between Davis’ complacent calculation and Coach Colson’s unsuspecting enthusiasm adds to our sense of dread. I hope, too, that the tournament seems like an incongruously innocent setting for murder: masking tape circles on the high-school gym floor, competitors in colorful uniforms, parents with video cameras, judges in folding chairs, popcorn and nachos. This isn’t exactly a world-class tournament. Matt, who lives in the fictional central Virginia town of Ridgecrest, is impressed that the tournament has drawn people from “as far away as Lynchburg” and “even a guy from Roanoke.” Murder should never intrude on such a homey, comfortable place. But we know it will.

Beyond that, I hope these paragraphs help the reader get a fuller sense of Matt and his world. Matt’s a low-key guy, so secure about his abilities and insights that he doesn’t get ruffled easily. As we’ll soon learn, he has strong emotions and fierce loyalties. And he’s sharp enough to know when he’s being taunted. But when Derrick criticizes Coach Colson, Matt won’t take the bait—he deflects an argument by lifting a shoulder and trying to shift the focus of conversation. When Derrick challenges him more directly, Matt understands why. He stands his ground, but he won’t let himself be drawn into juvenile bickering. What’s more, Matt’s analysis of Davis’s fighting style is detailed and precise. It goes beyond Berk’s careless dismissal and Joseph’s accurate but short-sighted praise. In many ways, Matt’s more perceptive and mature than his peers.

Not in all ways. Matt says he’s sitting “on the home-team bench with the other five members of the Ridgecrest High martial arts club.” In the first two pages, he speaks with only three of those members, all boys. There are two girls in the club, but at this point Matt isn’t paying much attention to them. At this point, he lives in a boy-centered world. Later in the first chapter, one of the girls, Graciana, will offer a comment on the match, an astute comment showing she realizes Bobby Davis can’t really be what he seems. Matt brushes her comment aside—or at least, he seems to. In fact, his body language shows he’s troubled by Graciana’s insight. He can’t admit that yet—he’s too wrapped up in his boy-world to take much notice of girls, beyond remarking that one might have a “nice body” or “nice hair.” All that will change, gradually, as Matt’s determination to discover

the full truth behind the murder pushes him closer to adulthood. *Fighting Chance* begins with the bad guy. It doesn't end there.



B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens' first novel, *Interpretation of Murder*, published by Black Opal Books, is a traditional whodunit that offers insights into deaf culture and sign language interpreting. Her young adult novel, *Fighting Chance*, published by The Poisoned Pencil /Poisoned Pen Press, is a martial arts mystery set in Virginia. B.K. has also published over fifty short stories, most in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. In addition, she has stories in two recently released anthologies: *Murder under the Oaks—Bouchercon Anthology 2015*, edited by Art Taylor and published by Down & Out Books; and *Jewish Noir*, edited by Kenneth Wishia and published by PM Press. She has won a Derringer and has been nominated for Agatha and Macavity awards. One of her stories won first place in a suspense-writing contest judged by Mary Higgins Clark.