

Catch ‘Em and Keep ‘Em

By Edith Maxwell
(also known as Maddie Day)

I’d like to break down the first two pages from *Flipped for Murder*, the first Country Store Mystery and my sixth published novel. It came out a scant two months ago from Kensington Publishing under the pen name Maddie Day.

Here’s the first paragraph:

My heart beat something fierce as the bell on the door jangled. It was make-or-break time. I’d been preparing for this day for weeks. I thought I was ready, but if I slipped up, I’d be in major hot water. Or financial ruin, as the case may be.

Do you want to keep reading? Authors always want to hook the reader with the first line, the first paragraph. Here I’m trying to do that in the coziest of ways. My protagonist, Robbie Jordan, is starting a new venture and is clearly nervous. In this paragraph, though, you have no idea why Robbie is nervous except that finances are at stake and that today has been in the works for a while. And because it’s written in first person, you also don’t know anything about Robbie’s gender. The second paragraph starts to reveal more.

My first customer at Pans ‘N Pancakes turned out to be Corrine Beedle, the new mayor of South Lick, Indiana, all five foot eleven and layered flaming hair of her. She sailed through the door like she owned the store. My country store and restaurant, that is. I’d seen her around town during the last month since she’d won the September election, but we hadn’t actually met, and paying attention to a local race had been below the bottom of my infinitely long to-do list.

So now we know that the narrator owns a country store and restaurant named Pans ‘N Pancakes. We also meet one of the main characters from the book, the bigger-than-life newly elected mayor, Corrine Beadle. Let’s continue:

Her unpleasant assistant, whom I had met many times, followed, looking slightly disgusted with the world as usual. Stella Rogers’s puffy upper eyelids and upturned nose gave her an unfortunate resemblance to the porcine genus.

“Welcome to Pans ‘N Pancakes.” Striding toward them, smoothing my blue-and-white striped apron, I hoped my smile wasn’t slipping from nervousness. I pulled out a chair at a table for two. “Thank you for coming to our grand opening.”

“Co-rrine Beedle.” The mayor, emphasizing the “Co” as much as the “reen,” gave me a direct look and a wide smile as she pumped my hand. “Mayor of South Lick.”

I extricated my hand while I still had feeling in it. “Robbie Jordan. Owner, proprietor, and head cook. Well, the only cook, normally.” I gestured to the eight-burner industrial stove and griddle behind the counter, where my aunt Adele was aproned up and tending a dozen sizzling sausages.

In these paragraphs we see more of Corrine and also meet Stella. We discover our narrator’s name – although we still don’t know if Robbie is a man or a woman – and that Robbie continues to be nervous. We also see that Robbie doesn’t much like Stella and that Aunt Adele is

helping for today (but not normally).

Let's learn some more:

"Glad to have a woman business owner in town," the mayor said, beaming.

"I'm happy to be here. And it's very nice to meet you, Madam Mayor."

"Oh, hogwash." She slid into the seat, her bony knee slipping out of the slit in the skirt of her red suit as she crossed one leg over the other. Her black-and-white heels looked about four inches high and a red-shellacked big toenail peeked out of the cutout in each shoe. "Just call me Corrine, honey."

Aha! Robbie is a woman. And flamboyant Corrine has some fun local color to her speech alongside her matching toenails and suit.

I'd lived in the hill country of southern Indiana for more than three years now, and I still wasn't used to nearly every female older than my twenty-seven years calling me "honey."

"Got it, Corrine." I glanced at her aide, whose position as mayor's assistant seemed to be permanent. Corrine must have inherited Stella, because I'd had to work with her over the past six months when I was applying for my building permit and other permissions so I could fix up the 150-year-old store. I greeted her, too.

Finally, some backstory. I – we authors – always try to give enough background information but not too much. And never a lecture. Robbie is twenty-seven but isn't a local to southern Indiana – so we now also know place. She fixed up the old building herself. Robbie is also a good enough businesswoman to not ignore Stella.

"Congratulations on finally getting open, Robbie. It's very quaint." Stella did not look like she meant any of it—except the dig about how long it had taken me to renovate the place.

Sure, it was quaint. I'd been aiming for an amalgam of what I hoped was everybody's dream, because it sure was mine: a warm, welcoming country store, a cozy breakfast-and-lunch place, and a treasure trove of antique cookware. The last was my particular passion, the vintage cookware lining the walls and several rows of shelves. I'd even hired a guy to restore the potbellied stove, fantasizing that a core group of locals might make this their meeting place, drinking coffee, exchanging yarns, offering advice. I'd worked my fingers off, and my butt, too, to get the place ready for today. My mom hadn't taught me fine cabinetry for nothing. I'd sawed and sanded, measured and nailed, painted and polished, until I could turn the sign on my dream to OPEN.

Despite not wanting to do an information dump, sometimes you have to fill in the reader so they don't get lost. In the preceding paragraph I wanted to work in a quick description of the interior, a hint at Robbie's construction skills, and the feeling of her devotion to this new venture. We also start to understand the stakes if the store and restaurant fail: who wants to abandon her dream, after all?

What do you think – do you want to read on? If not, I hope you'll let me know why. And if so – would love to hear from you after you finish [Flipped for Murder!](#)



Agatha-nominated and Amazon best-selling author Edith Maxwell writes the Country Store Mysteries (under the pseudonym Maddie Day). Using her own name Edith writes the Local Foods Mysteries, most recently *Farmed and Dangerous* (2015), and the Quaker Midwife Mysteries. *Delivering the Truth* will be out in April, 2016. Edith also writes award-winning short crime fiction, and, as Tace Baker, she has published the Lauren Rousseau Mysteries. Edith lives north of Boston with her beau and three cats, and blogs with the other [Wicked Cozy Authors](#), bringing you mysteries with a New England accent. You can also find her at www.edithmaxwell.com, [@edithmaxwell](#), and on [Facebook](#).