

## The First Page of *Anatomy of Fear*

Jonathan Santlofer

The first page of “Anatomy of Fear,” my novel about police sketch artist, Nate Rodriguez, was the last thing I wrote in the book. Why? Because it wasn’t until I’d finished the book that I fully understood what it was about.

I thought I was writing about an ancillary cop, a sketch artist, who gets pulled into a murder case that he ultimately solves, and that was true. But the real story lay beneath that, a story about fathers and sons, about guilt and loss and how it shapes us. Once I knew that, I wanted it to set a tone though I didn’t want it to be heavy-handed or sentimental; I never want that.

I made a conscious decision to write the first page in a close third person to set it apart from the rest of the book, which is written in the first. I wanted there to be some distance so the reader would feel as if they were hearing the story told to them and watching it at the same time. It’s very descriptive, very visual, but psychological, and I think, when one comes to the last line, shocking.

I wrote it quite fast; I knew what I wanted. At some point it was a little longer, but I honed it down. I knew it had to be short and compelling, no side notes, no gratuitous information.

I never identify that it is the protagonist’s story because it’s not necessary. All I wanted, needed, was to present this startling fact for the reader and have it sit there, hovering under everything else.

Here it is, the first page of “Anatomy of Fear.”

This is the way he always sees it.

The man, stretched out on the concrete, blood pouring out of his head into the grooves that define the sidewalk. From somewhere beneath the body, more blood is being pumped, an amoeba-shaped pond spreading beyond the torso.

He has heard detectives describe the crime scene, and years later stole the case report so he could read what a medical examiner had written. He knows the details: one shot in the head, two in the chest. He also knows that the shot in the head came later, as the man lay bleeding though still alive, because the medical examiner had noted two things: one, that the heart had bled out, indicating the body was still pumping blood before it shut down; and two, that there were powder burns on the man’s temple, a clear indication that the assailant fired that last bullet at close range.

This is the way he always sees it, often upon awakening, constantly there are as he falls asleep, though more often it has kept him awake.

It has become his bedtime story and his waking nightmare for almost twenty years. It is like an artificial limb, which, over time, he has learned to detach long enough so he can eat and dress, have conversations, make love, and even laugh. These are the moments he forgets, but they are few. It is not easy to forget that you killed your father.

I could have started the page with something about the dead body itself, but I wanted it to be about *seeing* something, remembering it, being obsessed and plagued by it: This is the way he always *sees* it. Followed by a clinical description of *what* he sees. I repeated the line closer to the end of the page for emphasis but also because the line now precedes something about the character, about *when* and *how* he sees this event, and since we know *what* it is, the line has, I think, a different kind of emotional resonance.

That first page bought me time.

From there, I went into Nate Rodriguez’s work: he’s making a sketch with a victim, very clinical and again descriptive, and it hopefully shows Nate’s skill as well

as his compassion. But the reader, I think, is still thinking, wondering: Is it this guy, Nate, who has killed his father? *How? Why?* They want to know and it keeps them turning pages to find out.

I think this was the most successful first page of any of my novels. I still like it several years after writing it, and that's saying a lot.

Like most writers, and particularly ones writing crime, I like a loaded first page, one that grabs the reader by the throat. But I don't want it to be too obvious. I think a great first page always sets a tone.

My favorite first lines in almost any novel are from Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita."

*Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul.*

Who doesn't want to keep reading to find out more about this Lolita, and about who is depicting her with such passion. Nabokov follows with several brief descriptions of Lolita and then, let's the reader know that the person speaking, the narrator, is also a murderer—but he doesn't tell you why or who he has murdered.

I don't think a first page is about *information*. It's about arresting the reader with something compelling and unique about the novel, about the story you are about to tell.

I tried to pack a lot into one page, but it's all oblique because it's not yet assigned to a character; it's a tonal, like washing in a background color in a painting. Only then, was I ready to tell the story.

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Jonathan Santlofer is the author of 5 novels, *The Death Artist*, *Color Blind*, *The Killing Art*, *The Murder Notebook*, and *Anatomy of Fear*, which won the Nero Award for best crime novel of 2009. He is co-editor, contributor and illustrator of the short story anthology, *The Dark End of the Street*, and editor/ contributor of *LA NOIRE: The Collected Stories*. His short stories appear in numerous collections, including *The Rich & the Dead*, edited by Nelson De Mille, *New Jersey Noir*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates. He served as editor/contributor for Akashic Books *The Marijuana Chronicles* and for Touchstone's bestselling serial novel *Inherit the Dead*. He currently teaches Crime Fiction Writing in Pratt Institute's Creative Writing program and is director of the Center For Fiction's Crime Fiction Academy. He is the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts grants, has been a Visiting Artist at the American Academy In Rome, the Vermont Studio Center and has serves on the board of Yaddo. Trained as a visual artist, Santlofer is currently at work on a fully illustrated adventure novel. [www.jonathansantlofer.com](http://www.jonathansantlofer.com)