

First Two Pages – Should Have Played Poker and Comic Relief by Debra H. Goldstein

Why do people giggle in stressful situations? Some say the snicker is a nervous reaction that relieves the tension of the moment. Whether suppressed or a full chuckle, the laugh distracts both the person making the sound and the one hearing it. Different senses are impacted as the tee-hee is heard, the movement of the giggler's body is felt or observed, and the thoughts and reactions being experienced are disrupted. In a written work, the addition of a scene, character, or even a single line as comic relief serves a similar purpose.

A moment of humor underscores the importance of the line or passage before or after by its simple emotional juxtaposition. The reader may be rolling from having been hit with a right hook or the moment of comic relief may serve as a sucker's punch. **Should Have Played Poker: a Carrie Martin and the Mah Jongg Players Mystery** opens with the sentence:

“The first time I thought of killing him, the two of us were having chicken sandwiches at that fast-food place with the oversized rubber bird anchored to its roof.”

This sentence evokes memories of gimmicky fast-food joints, their mascots and the colors and shapes symbolizing them. In the real world, the sameness of the red and white of Chick-fil-a or McDonalds' golden arches consistently lulls an observer into a sense of comfort no matter where the restaurant is located. Consequently, the goal of this sentence is for the reader to smile and feel secure from a subliminal mental image.

That sense of security is destroyed by the information shared in the next paragraph.

“I know the one.” I hand a cup of coffee across my desk to a woman I have not seen in twenty-six years.

The speaker isn't laughing. Rather, a serious tone is being set with possible elements of accusation or at least questions respecting the twenty-six-year gap. Unlike some books that

provide a perfect description of the characters or the crime in the first two paragraphs, **Should Have Played Poker** begins by thrusting the reader into the conflicting emotions of two characters. Character description and motivation don't come until the next two paragraphs.

With her free hand, Charlotte Martin pushes back a gray strand escaping from her ponytail. "It didn't seem like the right thing to kill him in a place they close on Sundays. Besides, Carrie, being a lawyer, you can understand I didn't want to do prison time. I decided it would be better to divorce your father."

In all the ways I've imagined reconnecting with my mother, I never thought it would be on a Sunday morning in my office discussing why she once wanted to murder my father. Stunned that this blue-jeaned woman carrying a large plastic bag knew I worked at Carleton Industries or that I'd even be here today, I put my coffee down on the brief I was drafting.

Once the conflict between the mother and daughter is established and the motivational bombshell dropped, a straight paragraph or two allows the reader to become engaged with the protagonist in a way that shares her fears and overwhelming desire to learn more about her mother's motivation for abandoning her family and for returning today. These paragraphs build to a second peak in the tension.

The problem is that peaks can't be maintained without exhausting the reader. Consequently, another passage that can be interpreted as comic relief, but which also offers a simple explanation of the mother's more complex actions, is given.

"... but as we lay in bed with him snoring and me seething, I again felt like killing him. When I found myself debating whether to stab him, beat him with the bedside lamp, or wait until morning and poison his oatmeal, I knew I needed to leave." She chuckles, letting me see laugh lines etched into her face.

"Don't look at me like that," she says. "Little things kept getting to me. Things like the way he left his black socks next to our bed every night for me to pick up. Or, how he sprinkled as much Gold Bond powder on our bathroom floor as on him."

At this point, hopefully, the reader is ready to join the emotional rollercoaster Carrie is about to ride as she learns that truth and integrity aren't always what she was taught to believe.



Bio: **Judge Debra H. Goldstein** is the author of **Should Have Played Poker: a Carrie Martin and the Mah Jongg Players Mystery** (Five Star Publishing, a division of Cengage – April 2016) and the 2012 IPPY Award winning **Maze in Blue**, a mystery set on the University of Michigan's campus. Her short stories and essays have been published in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including **Mardi Gras Murder** and **The Killer Wore Cranberry: a Fourth Meal of Mayhem**. Debra serves on the national Sisters in Crime, Guppy Chapter and Alabama Writers Conclave boards and is a MWA member. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama with her husband, Joel, whose blood runs crimson.

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Should Have Played Poker is available for pre-order. The print version and e-book will be available on April 20, 2016.

http://www.amazon.com/Should-Played-Carrie-Players-Mystery/dp/1432831593/ref=sr_1_1?s=b&ie=UTF8&qid=1457046628&sr=1-1&keywords=should+have+played+poker