

First two pages of *Catacomb*, by Sarah Wisseman

When I began to write *Catacomb*, the sequel to my first Italian mystery (*Burnt Siena*) I was determined to engage the reader at the very beginning. That goal was impressed upon me when I attended a conference session in which several authors met with two New York agents. Each author read the first two pages of a work in progress, the agents reacted, and then they passed the author a card saying, “yes, send me more,” or “not interested.” I read two pages from the chapter that begins with a loving description of Siena, Italy, through the eyes of protagonist Flora Garibaldi, and ends with the discovery of a body. The criticisms were, “Well, obviously you want us to know you’ve lived in Italy...” and “I don’t like your protagonist.” Not very encouraging! But those agents didn’t like anything they heard in that room; we authors all came away depressed.

My first reaction was reminding myself that finding the right agent or editor is a matter of timing and personal chemistry as well as good writing. The second was, “how can I revise those two pages to make them more compelling?”

In my writing process, I often write a first scene and junk it later, realizing that the real story starts later, or that the first draft set the scene or introduced the plot too slowly. This is similar to what I did in my academic career as an archaeologist; I rewrote the introduction at the very end, after I understood the entire progression of the story and what the beginning should say.

So with *Catacomb*, I discarded a scary preface that I really liked, deciding it belonged later in the book. Instead, I began the story in the middle of an interaction between Flora and her policeman boyfriend:

It was a fine day for an argument.

“You did *what*?” Flora yelled.

“I called your boss and got you some time off,” said Vittorio Bernini.

“Why on earth? And who are you to jeopardize my new job? Why, you interfering so-and-so!” She refrained from calling him a bastard as the blood in her veins heated up.

“Calm down, *cara*.” Vittorio stopped and put his hands on her shoulders, holding her steady in one place. “There’s a good explanation.”

Flora, normally susceptible to the warmth of his hazel eyes, fidgeted under his hands and glared at him. “So explain. And it had better be good.”

He took her arm. “We can’t talk here.” They were in the middle of a piazza in Trastevere, the old part of Rome “across the Tiber.” He steered her to a café with spindly metal tables outside, choosing one at the back where other conversations would muffle their own. “Espresso for you?”

“Make it a *macchiato*.” She preferred strong Italian coffee with a little swirl of milk.

Flora Garibaldi drew out a chair and sat, looping her purse around one knee. The soft air of late April wafted around her, lowering her internal temperature. Maybe she wouldn’t boil over--yet. Vittorio had just done what he always accused her of doing, acting first and not thinking about other peoples’ reactions until it was too late. Now she was on the receiving end, and she didn’t like it.

Thus I introduce the two main characters and an ongoing conflict between them, namely Vittorio’s tendency to let the demands of his Carabinieri job override his personal relationships. Because these are my heroes and I want readers to empathize with both of them, I also mention one of Flora’s faults—her habit of rushing into things that has put her in danger in the past.

I can’t resist describing the luscious Italian setting—and I think most readers want to know where they are—so I insert a short paragraph while Flora waits for her drink:

As she waited for him to fetch their coffees, she decided that despite the occasional clashes of personality and inherited expectations, their first few months together as a couple had been quite satisfactory. They’d found a small but charming apartment, a third-floor walk-up with a tiny balcony, in Trastevere. Flora loved the area, with its cobbled streets and sunset colors on the painted stucco buildings: burnt orange, pale red, salmon, and gold. The non-existent grid plan of Rome no longer bothered her. Now, she reveled in the odd, triangular piazzas where she least expected them, the meandering streets, and the quiet, flower-filled corners of residential neighborhoods. She’d even adopted the Italian custom of putting out leftover dishes of pasta for the stray cats--some of the thousands of cats who weren’t living in the ruins of the Colosseum but stalked the unwary small rodents in every corner of Rome.



This sets the scene for the entire book, which takes place in modern Rome both above and below ground. The next problem is how to present Flora's viewpoint and introduce a little backstory. The relationship between Flora and Vittorio is crucial because they have to solve an urgent mystery while working out their personal problems on the fly.

The heavenly aroma of fresh coffee made her turn around. Vittorio approached, his compact body moving smoothly like an experienced waiter's between crowded chairs and café tables. He balanced the two cups of coffee in one hand and a couple of pastries in the other. Ha—did he plan on sweetening her temper with sugar and fat? *Think again, buster.*

He might behave like a domineering Italian male, but she had to admit he was good-looking. Not for the first time, Flora admired his narrow face, framed by dark brown hair with a little wave in the front. He looked more like a scholar than a policeman. Not so odd, really, since he'd begun his career as an art historian, just like Flora. She was still trying to figure out what had attracted him to policing, beginning with the Siena murder squad.

I hope I convey that Flora loves Vittorio and wants their relationship to work. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that they will eventually marry if they can sort out clashing parental expectations and be a little more forgiving of each other's quirks.

Why would Vittorio interfere in Flora's job when he knows her probable reaction? The stakes must be high:

Flora took the almond pastry and bit into it as if she hadn't just had breakfast an hour before. "Now tell me. Why did you call my boss, and why didn't you discuss it with me first?"

Vittorio took a sip of coffee and then met her eyes. "The assignment came up very suddenly yesterday. My boss threw it in my lap and told me to get busy recruiting help, because it's a huge job."

"What's a huge job?"

He deflected her question with one of his own. "What do you know about the Monuments Men?"

She stared at him. "Ah, they were a special unit deployed to search for art stolen by the Nazis during World War II, right? An American unit." Flora sipped her coffee. It was delicious, much better than the slightly muddy stuff they made at home in the little pot that boiled coffee from the bottom.

"Yes. Actually, the unit was formed by the Allied armies. The official name of the group was 'Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives.' The Monuments Men did most of their work between 1943 and 1945 under very difficult circumstances. They weren't military men, most of them--"

"I remember. They were museum directors, curators, conservators. Art historians. There were about three hundred of them."

Vittorio's mouth tightened. "More than that. And their work continued long after the war. About sixty of the Monuments Men remained in Europe, serving as art detectives, searching for caches of stolen art that were hidden in caves, churches, villas, and even salt mines."

"So why are you suddenly spouting history of the Monuments Men? And you haven't told me why you found it necessary to call Ottavia."

He took a sip of his coffee and lowered his voice. "Because *il primo capitano* Moscati suggested it."

Flora, feeling an odd tingle between her shoulder blades, waited.

"There's a rumor going around that the Monuments Men missed a significant cache of art stolen by the Nazis somewhere under Rome. Art stolen from prominent Jewish families."

This section is tricky; I need to convey a certain amount of information, but I don't want to "dump" too much into the narrative and lose the reader. Since I'm a writer from an academic background who wants her novel to include history and archaeology as well as great characters and a compelling story, I face this problem with every novel. I decide to parcel out some of the

necessary facts in this brief conversation between the two protagonists while including a humanizing detail: Flora's greed for sweets. Other information will be woven in later, in discussions between policemen and the international group of scholars and specialists convened by Vittorio and Flora.

Writing a first draft is very difficult for me, but I always feel more hopeful when I have one, a solid skeleton, even if it is too short for a standard manuscript submission. Then the fun begins: revision. For me, this is adding enticing details, fleshing out conversations, deepening character development. A very helpful tool is the notes I took in Nancy Pickard's workshop on manuscript revision several years ago. Nancy demonstrated five elements an author should strive for in every chapter or major scene: **Conflict, Action, Senses, Turn, and Surprise (CASTS)**.

In *Catacomb*'s two pages, I began with **Conflict** (Vittorio going over Flora's head to talk to her boss). There's very little physical **Action** in this first scene beyond eating and drinking at the café, but there is plenty of give and take between the two characters and a promise of physical action to come (it does, in Chapter 2). The five **Senses** are evoked in the descriptions of food, drink, the soft air of spring, and the environment of Rome. **Turn**, a change in attitude by a character during the scene, occurs as Flora's initial anger is replaced by interest. **Surprise**, defined as a plot twist that surprises either the protagonist or the reader, comes at the end of Chapter 1 when Vittorio reveals he wants Flora's professional help in finding the lost art.

How does an author balance such elements to engage a reader's attention? Not only does this vary with each book, but it changes depending on the genre of the novel. A Dan Brown thriller has major action—a chase, a theft, or a murder—within the first few pages. A cozy mystery may begin with conversation or the inner thoughts of the protagonist. I intended *Catacomb* to be

suspenseful, but to unfold more slowly than a thriller and to contain plenty of color and texture about Rome's catacombs and Nazi-looted art.

As I develop the manuscript for Book 3 in my Flora Garibaldi Art History Mysteries, I have to keep all these points in mind. It feels like juggling plates, complete with the occasional crash...oops!



Sarah Wisseman is a retired archaeologist. Her experiences working on excavations and in museums inspired two contemporary series, the Lisa Donahue Archaeological Mysteries and the Flora Garibaldi Art History Mysteries. Her settings are places where she has lived or traveled (Israel, Italy, Egypt, Massachusetts, and Illinois) and her favorite museum used to be housed in a creepy old attic at the University of Illinois. www.sarahwisseman.com