

Only Trouble Is Interesting
by Marianna Heusler

In my middle grade thriller, One Stone Left Unturned, I choose to tell the tale from two different protagonists, who lived centuries apart. The first point of view is that of Tatiana Romanov, the doomed daughter of Tsar Nicholas Romanov. The second point of view is that of Augusta Ashford, a modern day teenager.

I must admit that I thought long and hard about which point of view to use in the opening chapter. A former teacher, I know how easily middle grade kids can be bored. If I began with an historical segment, would they be turned off, because, after all, the action takes place a hundred years ago? They might think - who cares?

But I finally decided that it was Tatiana's story that drove the novel forward. Besides, I had spent a year researching the Russian Revolution, and, in spite of the time passed, Tatiana had been indeed a very real, breathing character, who lived a fairy tale life and died a horrible death.

Every good writer knows that you have to begin your novel with a hook, something that compels the reader to want to keep on reading. Paragraphs and paragraphs of nothing but description won't work for kids and, quite frankly, don't work for me either. I needed a hook.

When I teach writing, one of the first things I tell my students is that "only trouble is interesting." We may aspire to a perfect life, where everything goes well, but we don't like to read about it (and some of us don't even like to hear about it). So I had to interject trouble - right at the beginning.

In the first two pages, I needed to introduce one of the main characters, make sure that she was in trouble, and set the scene without bogging it down with heavy description.

A lot to accomplish and it took several drafts.

The novel begins –

"What's happening, Mama?" Tatiana's stomach tightened with terror. She thought she might vomit. "Where are they taking us?"

"Keep calm," her mother said in anything but a calm voice. "Remember who we are. Your father is the Tsar. That is like God. Nobody can harm God."

Tatiana watched Olga, the oldest sister, trying to put on a brave face. Marie, Tatiana's younger sister, was crying and Anastasia, the youngest girl, looked stunned. But it was her brother who everyone watched most.

If Alexis should be shoved, if he should fall, he could bleed to death.

In these few sentences, the reader has met Tatiana and her three sisters, Olga, Maria and Anastasia, as well as her mother.

The reader knows that something awful is about to happen, because Tatiana is terrified. We also realize that she is being led away with her family, although she has no idea of where she is about to go. The reader is told that Tatiana is the daughter of the Tsar and, from the brief comment her mother makes, it should be obvious to the reader that Tatiana's mother is an entitled woman, who thinks that she is married to God.

I have also introduced Tatiana's brother, Alexis. Readers know right away that there is a problem. He is a sickly, frail boy, and although until later they won't know the name of the disease that ultimately brought down the Russian Empire, they should realize that Alexis, heir to the Russian throne, has plenty of trouble.

And so does the entire family.

The noise outside the Red Drawing Room was growing louder. What started as a mere rumbling in the lower quarters of the palace was now a roar. The soldiers were stationed right outside the door. "Be brave," her mother said as she gave each child a felt scapula, which bore a picture of Father Gregory, or as he was known, "Rasputin." And then Alexandra bellowed in a louder, stronger, more confident voice, "Long live the Tsar."

In the above paragraph I mention Rasputin and that Alexandra, Tatiana's mother, considers him to be a holy man.

It might have been her statement that prompted the next action. The door burst open and a mob of soldiers, wearing white handkerchiefs around their wrists, stormed and surrounded the startled children. Alexis flew to his mother, who hugged him protectively. The girls stood paralyzed. Tatiana thought that this was a nightmare and she would soon wake up in bed with Olga, snoring beside her.

Except for the smell. The soldiers had a distinct odor. They reeked of perspiration, of cheap cologne, of tobacco, and of something else which quickened Tatiana's heart. Gunpowder.

"Empress Alexandria Romanov, you are hereby arrested for committing crimes against the people of the Soviet Russia." A soldier with a flat face, a bald head and a plump body was reading from a wrinkled, stained piece of paper.

In this section, the reader knows that Tatiana and her family are being arrested.

To Tatiana's surprise her mother laughed. "Surely you jest, my good man. The Russians know that neither I nor my husband, Nicholas, has ever done anything but protect them. And, if you think for one moment, that you can forcibly remove me and my children from the Alexander Palace, you are sadly mistaken. Even if you have kept us

prisoners in our own home for five long months. Do you really believe that we're just going to leave?"

Now the soldiers were laughing.

"If you didn't think you had to leave, why did you pack?" Another soldier peered at her coldly through square glasses. He turned suddenly and noticed the dying fire. "And why did you burn all your personal papers?"

I tried to weave in some background information through the dialogue, rather than bore the reader with paragraphs of description. The reader learns that the Romanov Family have been locked in the Alexander Palace for five months.

Alexandra did not answer the question. Perhaps she was thinking of the days, not long ago, where no one dare speak to a member of the Imperial family, unless he was spoken to first.

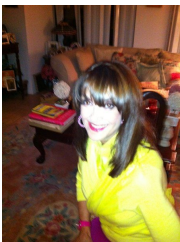
Tatiana can guess what her mother is thinking. In her own mind she remembers that, as royalty, no one was allowed to talk to the Romanovs and now the soldiers are laughing in their faces.

At the end of the first two pages, I hope the reader will identify with Tatiana, who is about to lose so much, her home, her castle, her father's power, in danger of losing her brother, and ultimately her own life.

I would say that is plenty of trouble.

The link to the book -

<https://www.amazon.it/One-Stone-Left-Unturned-English-ebook/dp/B00CLZDDHY>



Marianna Heusler is an Edgar nominated author of nine books and hundreds of short stories. A former educator, she has taught elementary grades in both Catholic and private schools. She makes her home in Manhattan, with her son, her husband, and her aging dog, Dolce.

At midnight on July 16, 1918, Tsar Nicholas Romanov and his family were murdered, thus ending the Russian Empire. Historians believe a peasant by the name of Rasputin was instrumental in the downfall of the dynasty. Because Nicholas thought that Rasputin could cure his son, who was suffering with hemophilia, Rasputin was able to influence the Imperial Family.

But what if Rasputin's power did not come from God, as he claimed, but from a simple jewel, a tricolored, fifteen carat tourmaline? And what if that very stone landed in the hands of a lonely teenager a century later?

*The middle grade novel, *One Stone Left Unturned*, is told from two points of view, two teenage girls, living parallel lives in different times and different places, with a similar goal - to survive.*