

What Could Possibly Go Wrong?
by Molly MacRae

We put a lot of pressure on the first two pages of a book, bless their hearts. We ask them to introduce characters, set the scene, give readers some idea of what the story is about, and maybe a glimpse of a theme or two. And we want those two little pages to do all that while drawing readers in without bogging them down. Hoo boy. How do we do that? For *Plaid and Plagiarism*, the first two pages and I took big breaths and hit the ground running. Here's the opening paragraph:

“And there's no need to cluck your tongue at my back, either,” Christine said, not waiting for Janet to catch up. “You know well enough it's time we went to see the house for ourselves and find out what the delay is.”

By jumping into the story at the end of a conversation, I have three goals. First is to jumpstart tension. We pick up on that when Christine doesn't wait and Janet clucks her tongue at Christine's back. Second is to set readers wondering what happens next. What is this delay and why didn't Janet and Christine attend to it earlier? Third is to let readers know that things aren't as they should be—which introduces one of the themes: What happens when someone's ideas of *what should be* are constantly slapped down by *what is*? The next two paragraphs tell us where we are.

It should have been the best kind of morning the Highlands had to offer, and Janet Marsh was irritated that it wasn't turning out that way. Proof of the day's bright possibilities met her as she followed Christine Robertson out the door and down the steps of Yon Bonnie Books—their bookshop. Traffic along the High Street promised eager tourists. The breeze from the harbor carried the tang of salt and only a hint of fish. Water lapping the sand below the seawall matched the clear May sky with no threat of rain. A swath of bluebells disappeared into the oaks fringing the banks of the River Sgail, and the river, not much more than a wide stream, splashed under the arched stone bridge she and Christine crossed. The hills rising behind the shops and houses and

wrapping around the farthest ends of Inversgail appeared to embrace the village this morning, looking benevolent rather than brooding.

Janet wondered briefly about joining the bluebells and disappearing into the trees instead of following Christine down the street. “I don’t want to intrude—”

Now we know we’re in a coastal town in the Highlands and that Janet and Christine own a bookshop there. That sounds as though it might be a charming, pleasant, and cozy setup. But, because my goal is for the tension to continue and for readers to ask more questions, once again things are not as they should be or might be. Why is Janet thinking about disappearing with the bluebells? Why, where, and upon who does she not want to intrude? Why is Christine insisting? Why is Janet going along with her?

“We won’t intrude,” Christine said. The soft burr of her accent took on a sterner tone.

“We will simply walk past the house. We might go so far as to knock on the door.”

“No knocking,” Janet said. Her Illinois twang had the advantage of sounding firm and final. “I agreed to give the renters another few days.”

Christine pulled up short. “Again? When did you agree to that? It’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

Rather than look Christine in the eye, Janet admired the red tiled roof of Paudel’s Newsagent, Post Office, Convenience and pretended her short gray hair needed better arranging behind her ears.

“You’ve gone soft since leaving the States,” Christine said.

“Not soft. I’m treading carefully and trying to fit in. I don’t want to be one of those people who insist on things being the way they are back home, or try to impress people by throwing money around, or talk louder as if that will help people understand them.”

We're learning more about the two characters. Christine is Scottish. Janet is American. Janet appears to be old enough to have gray hair. The tension between them continues and a second theme is introduced: The character as a fish out of water. This segues nicely into the goal for the next two paragraphs, which is to slip in a bit of backstory by showing that Janet and Christine, despite the tension between them, are old and good friends.

Christine put her arm around Janet. "You never behaved that way before and you aren't going to start now. You and Curtis and the children were well liked all the years you came here." Christine's reassurance came to an awkward stop. Janet and her family had quit spending part of each summer in their Inversgail house when her husband, Curtis, a professor of economics, started an affair with one of his married graduate students. "Anyway," Christine plowed on, "Mum and Dad remember you and that's saying a lot because half the time Mum might as well be away with the fairies. But to tell the truth, you and I are both strangers. All you have to do is listen to me to know that. I gave Illinois forty of my best years and Illinois paid me back by removing any trace of my lovely Scottish accent."

The women looked at each other and sputtered. Christine's native accent might have faded according to her aged parents' ears, but few Americans would agree.

I have three goals for the last paragraph. The first is to introduce a note of humor (because I like life cushioned by a few laughs). The second is to introduce a note of worry. As soon as someone says "it is" or "we are" I want the reader to think, "But wait. Don't you remember? Things aren't always as they should be." The third goal is to remind readers that this is a murder mystery.

"It is true, though," Christine said. "You should hear the dreadful things Mum and Dad whisper behind my back. Except they're both so deaf they only *think* they're whispering."

She eyed Janet up and down. “You’re fine the way you are. All four of us are, and you and I and the girls are going to make a go of this move or die trying.”

The underlying question I wanted to set up from the beginning of *Plaid and Plagiarism* is, “What could possibly go wrong?” That’s also the question that runs through my head every time I start to write a story or novel. It’s a mashup of the hope, fear, and possibly misguided yearning for derring-do that lope through my life. If the first two pages and I did our job right and if we met our goals, then we’ve left readers flipping to page three and beyond. And what could possibly go wrong if they do that?



The Boston Globe says Molly MacRae writes “murder with a dose of drollery.” *Plaid and Plagiarism*, the first book in Molly’s new Highland Bookshop Mysteries, will be out in December 2016. She’s also the author of the award-winning Haunted Yarn Shop Mysteries from NAL/Penguin. Her short stories have appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* since 1990 and she’s a winner of the Sherwood Anderson Award for Short Fiction. Molly lives in Champaign, Illinois.

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