

Second Thoughts on that Beginning

by Lise McClendon

The first two pages of my latest novel, *The Things We Said Today*, are not the original beginning. As many writers discover while writing long fiction, I began somewhere else and realized after I had completed what I thought was the entire novel that I needed more at the beginning.

What begins a novel is a promise to the reader of many different things. A story-line, for sure, especially in plot-centric stories like mysteries or suspense. A promise of what and where the story is about. But also it describes a bond with a character, a person whom the reader can connect with, who will be with them, representing the reader throughout the novel. A compassionate, empathetic, sympathetic character, a friend whose corner we crouch in, hoping for the best.

My novels about the five Bennett sisters are character-heavy. Five sisters may be four too many for some readers but as a middle sister myself I gave my middle sister, Merle Bennett, the starring role in these novels. The other sisters play supporting roles, some more central, some more peripheral as secondary characters must be. It is tempting to consider all your beloved characters as central, as equally important, but that isn't the way stories are best told, in my opinion. My five Bennett sisters are based loosely on Jane Austen's in *Pride and Prejudice* although I've given them different names, personalities, and a contemporary time period. They're all lawyers but have different interests in the law, some hating it, some loving it.

When I approached *The Things We Said Today*, having already explored various relationships and sisters in previous books, I realized this would be Annie's story, as she is the eldest sister who is getting married in Scotland in the book. The entire plot winds around the wedding week in the Highlands. (No, it doesn't turn out as planned.) So I began writing the story with Annie in mind, her hesitations and doubts about this wedding at the ripe old age of 55. But when I finished it and set it aside for a few weeks it became clear to me there was more to the story to write. And one essential part to write was a new first chapter. Because, although it's Annie's wedding, it is still essentially Merle's story.

Merle is the conscience of the sisters, the tent pole they all gather round. The solid center, the rational, practical sister. But she has her own issues about life and love and these issues end up being at least as important as whether her oldest sister gets hitched to a guy in a kilt.

So back to the drawing board. I wrote this short, almost introductory chapter to get us in the scene, in the place. To introduce the landscape and the expectations that are soon to be overthrown and put in their place. Several of the books about the sisters take place in France so I wanted first of all to explain this, a different, setting. No, Scotland doesn't turn out to be sunny and friendly. No, love isn't enough to conquer everything.

But in its own way, despite intrigue, whisky, torrential rains, and dashed hopes, Scotland provides. Merle is a pessimist yet she is cautiously full of hope, like so many of us. I try to show the dichotomy of life in this first chapter, that we hedge our bets to protect our dreams, and yet without dreams we can't truly find the answers in our hearts. Although the first chapter is happy and hopeful, it is almost too happy and hopeful, raising our suspicions of complications to come.



The Things We Said Today

Chapter 1

A Tuesday in May
Northeast Coast of Scotland

The Scottish landscape sped by the window in flashes of greens, ruby reds, and golds as Merle Bennett sat curled into the train seat, holding Pascal's warm hand. All the planning, coordinating, and anxiety of the last few months evaporated as they passed fields of sheep, horses grazing on emerald pastures, trees aglow with new finery, and tiny villages squatting low along roadsides.

As a pessimist Merle never thought it could all come together, even with her prodigious check-lists. But there is one important reason to be a pessimist. As one you are

subject to pleasant surprises, and Merle was experiencing one now. Things *had* come together. Stasia, the hyper-organized sister, had wielded her mighty binder full of maps, weather charts, and suitcase-packing diagrams. Merle provided lists of clothing required for each day of the week. Annie, the eldest and the bride, had floated along on everyone else's plans. The younger sisters were blissfully ignorant of all lists, treating the whole thing as a big adventure. And it was, Merle supposed, if you looked beyond the machinations to make it all happen.

Annie's wedding was in five days. Merle was crazy about Callum Logan, as he made her sister happy. That was easy to see. But it would be stretching it to say that she thought six months ago that this wedding would happen. Moving entire families across the Atlantic Ocean, coordinating flights, getting passports for some, renewals for others, hotel rooms, rental cars, all that plus the actual wedding planning. Not to mention trying to make everyone happy. It was a nightmare to Merle. In the end she only had to coordinate herself and Pascal. And that, as it turned out, was easy.

He had his head back, eyes shut, black curl drooping on his forehead. The sway of trains made most people sleepy but Merle rode one almost every day. She rubbed the back of his hand with her thumb. Almost everything about Pascal was easy, she thought, and that made her twitchy. Life in general didn't fit that pattern. There were compromises and disappointments, failures and chaos. People left you, grew up, moved away, died. There was so much room for loneliness and disaster.

Life was irritatingly random. So she made her lists, trying to control what she could and cross the rest off.

They slowed to a stop in a small town. The station was bright, cheerful, with splashes of blue paint. Sunshine poured through glass panels in the roof. Everything she'd heard about Scotland seemed wrong. It was beautiful, peaceful, full of spring flowers, blue skies, and happy faces.

She made a quick promise to herself to smile all week. Her son Tristan wouldn't be here to remind her. A glance at Pascal might do the trick. It shouldn't be that hard. She was happy for Annie, who despite years of protestations and bohemian ways, was actually getting hitched.

It was amazing. It was romantic. And it felt inevitable the way the best things do, as if life had finally given up throwing obstacles in your path and wrapped its warm arms around you and whispered those happy words you'd been longing to hear.

This is your moment. Go live it.

BIO:



Lise McClendon is the author of four books in the Bennett Sisters Mystery Series. The latest is *The Things We Said Today*. She also writes thrillers as Rory Tate, the latest being the Shakespearean thriller, *PLAN X*. Last year she released the innovative parody and darkly comic culinary thriller she wrote with four other well-seasoned crime writers, *Beat Slay Love: One Chef's Hunger for Delicious Revenge*. She lives in Montana and online at lisemcclendon.com.