

The First Two Pages

By Helaine Mario, Author of The Lost Concerto

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As writers, we want readers to “fall into our story.” The goal for all of us is to draw the reader in. The mystery is how to do just that. An editor once told me that the writer has 25 pages to capture the reader’s interest. But for me, and for many of you, it is the first few pages of your novel that can make all the difference.

You should know that I wrote – and rewrote - the first pages of my novel, The Lost Concerto, hundreds of times. And even now, after being published for some 18 months and winning several awards, there are words and phrases I still would change if given the chance.

So, how do we draw readers into our world? I have written the books I wanted to read. That means, as a lover of suspense novels, I’ve had to ask myself what words, what images, what characters, what actions, what questions, would intrigue me enough to draw me in, make me want to keep turning the pages? For me, the answer was to paint a picture with words – a picture so mysterious and compelling that the reader could not help but wonder, what happens next?

Here are the first two pages of my novel, The Lost Concerto. I’ll explain my thinking and choices at the other end.

OVERTURE

(in music: an opening, preceding a larger work)

“The bright day is done, and we are for the dark.” Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra

BRITTANY, FRANCE. LATE SUMMER.

They fled from Rome on a rain swept August night.

First in the black Citroen, speeding north into the darkness. Then two trains, the small fishing boat, the final climb up a steep path through thick, swirling mist. Moving from shadow to shadow for two days, until they stood before the high, locked iron gates of the sixth century Benedictine convent. *Couvent de la Brume...* The Convent of the Fog. The nuns welcomed them in silence.

She had chosen their hiding place well. The tiny Breton isle lay seven kilometers off the French coast, lost in the immense blackness of the ocean. Isolated by dangerous reefs and haunted by rolling, dense grey fogs, the island was a world apart - a final sentinel before the vastness of the misted sea.

The woman thought they would be safe, finally, here at the very edge of the world.

For five days, they hid in the convent, sheltered by thick stone walls and the island's fog.

Each morning the woman stood at the arched window, keeping watch. Outside, beyond the small cloister, the island appeared and then was gone as mist swirled like veils across the hills. She watched the nuns plant vegetables in the garden, scrub whitewashed walls, kneel by the stone cross in the cloister to pray.

Each night, the woman sat vigilant in the watery darkness, listening to the soaring Gregorian chants, the muffled thunder of waves against jagged rocks, and the small breaths from the cot under the eaves.

Generations of seafarers had called the place Ile de la Brume. Fog Island.

She thought it was the last place on earth a man would look for his missing wife.

* * * *

On the first day of September, the soft cocoon of fog began to shimmer with light. The woman watched with growing dread as, one by one, the cottages and pines and

bright boats beyond the convent walls emerged from the haze. Too soon the sky turned clear as glass, and she hurried to gather their belongings while the sun spun like a golden coin toward the sea.

When all was ready she waited at the window, willing the sun to set. The light shimmered on the black pearls around her neck and caught her marble-pale face, once beautiful but now etched by fear and despair. *Hurry*, she pleaded with the glowing sky. *We need the protection of the night.*

But still the bright day lingered, fighting the dark...

Okay. That is the very beginning of my novel. Quite a bit of information packed into 400 words. Like many suspense novelists, I began with a prologue or, in this case, an ‘overture.’ For me, it is a wonderful device that allows you to begin with action and at the same time offer some back story and hints as to where this tale might go. By using the word ‘overture’ I am letting the reader know that classical music will play a large role in this story. And by beginning with the Shakespearian quote “we are for the dark,” I am saying, Get ready for a dark and suspenseful ride.

The first sentence, for me, should “set the scene” and have enough action to propel the reader forward. My first words, “They fled from Rome on a rain swept August night,” give a sense of place and time and, well, FLED is just a wonderfully scary action verb. (And since we always need to be able to laugh at ourselves, I did not realize until well after publication that my first sentence is a Snoopy spin off of ‘a dark and stormy night.’ Oh, well.)

Also, the island itself is almost a character. The reader can sense the isolation, hear the crash of waves on the reefs, feel the cold touch of the mist, see the convent appear and then vanish into the fog. I wanted the reader to ‘fall into’ this setting with me.

Most of all, these first few paragraphs set up a sense of urgency, and a series of intriguing questions for the reader. *Hurry*, whispers the woman. Why? Who is she? Why is she so afraid? What happened to make her flee? Why is she hiding from her husband? What are her secrets? Who is with her? What has happened to her – and what

will happen to her now?

It is every writer's hope that the reader will want to know, and turn the page.



Helaine Mario is the author of two published novels of suspense, ***Firebird*** (Amazon 2012) and the award-winning best seller, ***The Lost Concerto*** (Oceanview Publishing, July 2015). She currently is working on her 3rd novel, ***Dark Rhapsody***.

Helaine, a Boston University graduate, has been married for 47 years. She and her husband, Ron Mario, spend their time in Arlington, VA, and Longboat Key, FL. She is grateful to be a fourteen year cancer survivor and is most proud of her two children and five beautiful grandchildren. Her son, Sean, is the pianist who inspired the classical music background in ***The Lost Concerto***.

Helaine was a White House volunteer for Tipper and Al Gore and continues to be a passionate advocate for women & children's issues. Because she believes strongly in "giving back," she founded ***The SunDial Foundation, Inc.***, which benefits our most vulnerable women, children and families. All net royalties from Helaine's books go to local reading and family programs.

The Lost Concerto has won the Ben Franklin Silver Medal for Suspense, First Place Royal Palm Award, and been a Suspense Finalist for these awards: USA Best Books, International Book Awards, National Indie Excellence, and Next Generation Indie Books.

When it comes to writing, Helaine wants, more than anything, to tell a good story, create characters with depth, and paint pictures with words. To make people *feel*. She wants to be a storyteller forever.

Information on ***The Lost Concerto***, a novel of suspense by Helaine Mario

Maggie O'Shea is grieving the loss of her husband, who has drowned in a tragic accident far from home. Her grief has crushed her passion for music, and for Maggie, a classical concert pianist, the loss of her music is unbearable. Moving on is unthinkable, until a grainy photograph draws her into a perilous search across France for her missing godson and a long-lost love. ***The Lost Concerto*** tells Maggie's story, a story of love, loss, vengeance and courage, a story of mystery and intrigue and danger. Ultimately, it is the story of a woman who must fight to move on and find what has been lost within herself. In ***The Lost Concerto***, it is music that tells Maggie's story.

Book Trailer: <http://youtu.be/yxAYieoZRxg>

AWARDS :

SILVER MEDAL BEN FRANKLIN Award for Mystery/Suspense, 2016 from IBPA (Independent Book Publishers)

Finalist, 2015 USA Best Book Awards in category: Fiction - Mystery/Suspense

Finalist, 2016 National Indie Excellence Awards, Suspense

Finalist, 2016 Next Generation Indie Book Awards, Suspense

Finalist, 2016 International Book Awards, Mystery/Suspense

FIRST PLACE, 2016 Royal Palm Literary Award/Suspense, Florida Writers Assoc.

2015 Top Twenty List, The Reading Frenzy, reviewer Debbie Haupt

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Starred review by Library Journal. All starred reviews available on Amazon, Goodreads

Helaine Mario's first novel of suspense, FIREBIRD, is available as an E-book.

Royalties will go to local charitable organizations or Helaine's SunDial Foundation, which support our most vulnerable women, children and families.

Helaine is happy to talk about writing with Book Clubs in the DC or Sarasota areas.