

Author Jennie Spallone Reflects on the Opening Pages of *Deadly Choices*, Her Award-Winning Mystery Novel

In the bible, it says God created the heaven and earth. What a humongous contracting job it must have been to fill this unformed void, even for the all-powerful Builder of the Universe! Should the light of day and the stars of night come first, or should the waters be divided into land and sea? Decisions, decisions, decisions!

As a writer, I am plagued with those same types of questions every time I begin writing a new novel. While my doubts don't compromise the world's existence, the decisions I make do determine the fate of my characters in their own universe. Should the first sentence of my book open with the setting, action, or a character's dilemma? How do I hook the reader into continuing to read the pages that follow? For *Deadly Choices*, a police procedural, I chose "action":

"Warning lights unlit, siren silent, Ambulance Number 60 careened down fog-drenched streets in the pre-dawn autumn darkness on its return to the firehouse." I'd recently completed a 24-hour ride-a-long with two female paramedics as they responded to emergency dispatches throughout Chicago's dicey West Side. I attempted to paint a picture of what it felt like to return from a call. However, my word choice of "careened" was an image I created to fit the character of my imaginary ambulance driver, who was high on cocaine. If I had wanted to accurately describe my ride-a-long, I would have used the word "streamed," which has a smooth, controlled connotation, while "careened" has a swerve, out-of-control, feel to it.

“Some unseen radar directed the driver as she deftly maneuvered the ghost-like rig down West Madison Street through a maze of shattered liquor bottles and discarded syringes.” Whoa! I just realized – and this is 10 years after the book has been in print – that the ambulance driver was “deftly maneuvering,” which would negate my connotation of “careening,” the word choice I used only one sentence ago! Evidently, nobody noticed!

In this second sentence, which also happens to be the entirety of the second paragraph, I added setting and provided a “feel” of the neighborhood, with its description of “shattered liquor bottles and discarded syringes.”

My “unseen radar” and “ghost-like rig” word choices elaborated on the description of “fog-drenched streets in the pre-dawn autumn darkness” that was used in the first paragraph.

“...Replenishing supplies in the back of the rig, paramedic trainee Beth Reilly stole a glance at the driver. She grimaced as her paramedic officer pulled a sandwich bag from her jacket...” Again, I inserted an eye-dropper full of information I learned by watching the paramedics on my drive-along, re: what does a paramedic do en route back to the firehouse?

We now have been introduced to paramedic trainee Beth Reilly, the main character, but the word choices of “stole” and “grimaced” clue the reader that she is frightened and distressed by her paramedic officer’s actions. And what could be in that hidden sandwich bag that would produce a grimace??

“After five years as a nurse in Vietnam, followed by twelve years as a paramedic the Chicago Fire Department, Angie Ropella seemed to delight in all forms of human trauma.” From the beginning of our fourth paragraph, we’ve introduced the paramedic officer is a hard ass, trauma-junkie.

“Knuckled in-between 24-hour stints of stabbings, multi-vehicle collisions, and assaults was an assembly line of little old ladies forgetting their insulin, yuppies jogging into cardiac arrest, and winos urinating in doorways.” Wow! I didn’t realize how many hyphens I use in my writing! Did I mention I am ADHD and easily get distracted? To complete the fourth paragraph I needed to provide the reader with visual images of the varied traumas paramedics deal with on a daily basis. Rather than listing those traumas as a journalist would do, i.e. stabbings, collisions, Diabetic reaction, I supplemented each visual image with a rhythm, i.e. “old ladies forgetting their insulin,” “yuppies jogging into cardiac arrest,” and “winos urinating in doorways.”

“After one look at the mangled body, Beth vomited all over the back seat. Angie just grinned.

“You gonna be a medic, Reilly, you can’t keep having these little accidents. Clean it up. Then keep the kid company back here. I’ll drive.” We’ve skipped to the bottom of Page 2, where I am theoretically supposed to stop. Earlier in the day, the two paramedics had encountered the “limp body of a kid in a motorcycle helmet sprawled across the adjoin median strip, ...his body broken.” The paramedic trainee experiences a violent physical reaction. But Angie, a seasoned Viet Nam nurse and paramedic, has hardened her heart to death, as evidenced by her dispassionate advice to Beth.

“...she expertly weaved the red and white rig through a maze of congested traffic. She zigzagged around buses that suddenly jutted out in front of her onto Halsted and Clark. Cabdrivers leaned on their horns while joggers sprinted off to work and the unencumbered meandered home from all-night bars.” We’re almost at the end of the chapter, only 2 ½ pages long. The above images were taken from my ride-along experience, as well as my imagination.

Once again, these word-choices enabled me to paint pictures in my readers’ minds, as well as hear and experience the frenzied activity going on, i.e. “maze of congested traffic,” “buses...juttet out,” “cabdrivers leaned on their horns.”

I hope these brief insights encourage you to visit your favorite independent bookstore and purchase a thesaurus, the writer’s best friend. Lots more synonyms in print than on-line! Enjoy!

Deadly Choices

By Jennie Spallone

Chapter One (Excerpt)

Warning lights unlit, siren silent, Ambulance Number 60 careened down fog-drenched streets in the pre-dawn autumn darkness on its return to the firehouse.

Some unseen radar directed the driver as she deftly maneuvered the ghost-like rig down West Madison Street through a maze of shattered liquor bottles and discarded syringes.

The ambulance soundlessly streamed past derelicts pasted on a backdrop of scarred buildings. Replenishing supplies in the back of the rig, paramedic trainee Beth Reilly stole a glance at the driver. She grimaced as her paramedic officer pulled a sandwich bag from her jacket. Angie often relied on that white stuff in her baggie to anesthetize herself against an avalanche of shootings, beatings, and vehicle collisions.

After five years as a nurse in Vietnam, followed by twelve years as a paramedic with the Chicago Fire Department, Angie Ropella seemed to delight in all forms of human trauma. Knuckled in-between 24-hour stints of stabbings, multi-vehicle collisions, and assaults was an assembly line of little old ladies forgetting their insulin, yuppies jogging into cardiac arrest, and winos urinating in doorways.

Beth quickly averted her glance as Angie smirked at her through the rearview mirror. Her face was still felt hot with shame after the tongue-lashing she'd received earlier that night.

She had efficiently resuscitated a drug addict lying half-dead on his bungalow porch as neighborhood kids hopped over his unconscious form in a midnight game of tag.

But the next fiasco had completely unnerved her. A scrawny seventeen-year-old kid in an oversize leather biker jacket had been weaving his motorcycle back and forth across four clear lanes of traffic when his luck was stolen by a black Toyota traveling southbound down Lake Shore Drive.

“Where’s the body?” asked Beth, a former medical librarian.

“The kid must have been a human slingshot. Probably hit a tree and bounced into an oncoming lane of traffic. Let’s check out the median strip,” Angie said, grabbing a backboard. “Don’t forget your gloves.”

Extracting a pair of latex gloves from her pants pocket, Beth scurried to match Angie’s long strides. Six weeks into her job, she had no intention of contracting AIDS.

About fifty feet north, a tree lay broken in half. The limp body of a kid in a motorcycle helmet sprawled across the adjoining median strip. Carefully, the paramedics fastened a cervical collar on him with Velcro™, then lifted the broken body onto the backboard. Upon applying a tourniquet to halt the bleeding from his leg and splinting several broken bones, they gently placed the boy on a stretcher and boosted the gurney into the ambulance.

“Oh, man,” Angie said, groaning. “Check out this bone sticking through the kid’s thigh. As if he won’t have enough grief with a fractured pelvis, severe neck and back injuries, and a fractured skull.”

After one look at the mangled body, Beth vomited all over the back seat. Angie just grinned.

“You gonna be a medic, Reilly, you can’t keep having these little accidents. Clean it up. Then keep the kid company back here. I’ll drive.”

Up front, Angie picked up the radio. “This is Ambulance 60. We’ve got a trauma bypass and are en-route to Masonic.”

The early morning weekday scramble had already kicked in as Angie switched on her illegal boom box to some old Led Zeppelin. Flipping on the siren and lights, she expertly weaved the red and white rig through a maze of congested traffic. She zigzagged around buses that suddenly jutted out in front of her onto Halsted and Clark. Cab drivers leaned on their horns while joggers sprinted off to work and the unencumbered meandered home from all-night bars.

Sirens screeching, Angie drove as quickly as possible but the fog and congestion held her back like a dog in quicksand. “Oh, fuck, son-of-a-bitch. Damn bus drivers don’t give a shit about a life in danger.”

Lights and sirens still whirring, Ambulance 60 finally pulled up the ramp to Illinois Masonic Hospital. Angie jumped out and ran around to the back of the ambulance, yanked open the doors, and wheeled the gurney into the ER where the trauma team waited.

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MEET JENNIE



Suspense author Jennie Spallone wrote over one hundred profiles and feature stories for local and national publications, as well as the award-winning mystery novel *Deadly Choices* and *Window of Guilt*, before putting pen to *Fatal Reaction*.

Jennie, an active member of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America, has spoken at book clubs, bookstores, schools, and libraries, in addition to Mystery Conferences throughout the country, including Scene of the Crime, Bouchercon, Printer's Row, Sleuthfest, Malice Domestic, Magna Cum Murder, Midwest Literary Fest, Love is Murder, Public Safety Writers of America, Romantic Times Writers' Conference, and the University of Wisconsin Writer's Institute.

Please send your comments, questions, book club, and speaking engagement queries to jenniespallone@gmail.com