

## Sweating the Lede—or the First Two Pages of Barb Goffman’s “The Best-Laid Plans”

By Barb Goffman

Long before I started writing crime fiction, I wrote about real crimes—and county council meetings and interesting school events and more. I was a newspaper reporter. One of the most important things I learned in journalism school was to sweat the lede. (Yes, lede—not lead. Correct spelling was another thing they hammered home in grad school, and lede means the opening sentence or paragraph of a news article.)

I use the same approach when I write fiction. I sweat the beginning. It should be enticing so the reader keeps going. The first sentence and first paragraph (or graf, in journalism terms) should be interesting. Different. Compelling. That’s not always so easy to accomplish, but it remains a worthy goal.

I think I accomplished it in my story “The Best-Laid Plans,” published in *Malice Domestic 11: Murder Most Conventional* (a current nominee for the Agatha Award for best short story of 2016). This is the first paragraph:

It’s a good thing my fans couldn’t see me. Between my narrowed eyes, pursed lips, and burning cheeks, I probably looked like the killers I wrote about.

I hoped the first sentence would attract readers’ nosy side. When someone fears that someone else will see what he or she is doing, that makes it all the more fascinating. What’s going on that no one should see? It must be juicy. I want to know what it is. Don’t you? So that first sentence should drive the reader to keep reading.

Then in the second sentence, the reader learns that the character—who writes about killers—is enraged to the point of possible homicide. That’s juicy too. What could have made this person that angry? I hope readers will now be especially intrigued and want to know more.

The next paragraph serves to set the scene, letting the reader know that the person telling this story is cozy mystery author Eloise Nickel. This is important information. It’s one thing to know some random person is enraged. But when the enraged person is someone you wouldn’t think of as the murderous type, but is, instead, grandmotherly—a grande dame of her profession who drinks Darjeeling tea while sitting on a chintz loveseat—the reader should wonder what could have angered this person so much. That should make the story all the more enticing.

Then, on the rest of page one, the reader learns the answer. Eloise’s nemesis, Kimberly, has paid backhanded compliments to her in a premier industry magazine, intimating that Eloise is elderly and writes sweet, boring, old-fashioned books. Kimberly effectively turns “cozy” into a dirty word, while promoting her own “high-octane” books. Being patronized in a national magazine by another author would make anyone angry. But as the reader learns, Kimberly isn’t anyone to Eloise. They once were friends, until Kimberly got what she needed from Eloise and moved on. Now they’re set to share the stage as honorees at a big convention in just a few weeks. Kimberly

might as well have thrown down a gauntlet. And Eloise is ready to pick it up.

Providing this detail gives the reader just enough information to understand why Eloise is so angry and to lead the reader to root for Eloise and to be eager to see what she does next. The reader may guess revenge is coming and should expect it will be satisfying.

The idea that something entertaining is about to happen was important to me as I wrote because I like it when reading is fun. I often write funny stories. Even with stories that aren't broadly humorous, I want the reader to enjoy the ride. The reader should be laughing or smirking or expressing some enjoyment with each turned page. So as we approach the end of this first scene, the reader sees Eloise calming down, having spoken to her agent, who reminded her that Kimberly's words would anger Eloise's fans, and this could be good for Eloise in the end. Here's the third-to-last paragraph of the scene:

I thanked her and disconnected. Janette was right, I realized as I sipped my tea and its fruity scent began soothing my nerves. A lot of people would be mad at Kimberly because of what she'd said. If I went to the convention taking the high road, pretending I wasn't bothered, I'd gain more respect and more readers. This could work out well for me in the end.

Then I hit the reader with a twist, showing Eloise's devious side in the last two paragraphs of the first scene:

And if Kimberly were to have a little accident during the festivities—nothing fatal, just painful—well, those things do happen.

I laughed long and loud. Who said I wasn't good at plotting?

That's where the fun comes dashing in. Before reaching this point, the reader already understood why Eloise was driven to rage, and the reader should want Eloise to get the revenge she deserves. Now the reader has seen Eloise's fun side, too. That's a good combination: a fun, devious woman out for revenge at a public forum—a woman people won't see coming because she's taking the high road, and because she's aging and drinks tea on a chintz loveseat. Eloise is the living embodiment of the cozy characters she writes about, and like the bad guys she creates, she's ready to hide in plain sight.

That, I believe, is a good setup for a story. The reader is left primed, eager to turn the pages, excited for the fun that's sure to come.

But the reader knows one more thing: the story's title is "The Best-Laid Plans," famous words from Scottish poet Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse" (and famously alluded to in John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*). The words are part of a sentence that's often translated as, "The best-laid plans of mice and men oft go astray." So while the reader is ready for some fun, the reader also goes into the second scene hopefully knowing that things might not go so well for Eloise. She controls her plan but not the outcome. She'll likely suffer as she seeks revenge—and

as we mystery writers know, that is a great element to include in a story. Readers love to see characters suffer. It keeps things interesting.

I hope this setup will leave the reader rubbing her hands gleefully, ready for the coming ride. At least, that was my thought process as I wrote these first two pages. I hope readers will check them out (and the rest of the story). It's available on my website:

[http://www.barbgoffman.com/The\\_Best\\_Laid\\_Plans.html](http://www.barbgoffman.com/The_Best_Laid_Plans.html). And thanks to B.K. Stevens for inviting me here to share my thoughts with you.

## Bio



Barb Goffman edits mysteries by day and writes them by night. She's won the Agatha, Macavity, and Silver Falchion awards for her short stories. The latter honor was for her book, *Don't Get Mad, Get Even* (Wildside Press), which won the Silver Falchion for best single-author mystery collection of 2013. Barb has been a finalist for national short-story crime-writing awards nineteen times, including the Anthony and Derringer awards. She's up for the Agatha Award right now for "The Best-Laid Plans," published in *Malice Domestic 11: Murder Most Conventional* (Wildside Press). Her newest story is "Whose Wine Is It Anyway?" It appears in the mystery anthology *50 Shades of Cabernet*, which was published last month by Koehler Books. When not writing, Barb runs a freelance editing and proofreading service. She blogs every third Tuesday at [www.SleuthSayers.org](http://www.SleuthSayers.org). In her spare time, she reads, reads, reads and plays with her dog. Learn more at [www.barbgoffman.com](http://www.barbgoffman.com).