

The First Two Pages of RIVER CITY DEAD
by Nancy G. West

Aggie Mundeen, with her wry take on life, sees humor in most situations. She's an advice columnist and amateur sleuth in love with a commitment-averse San Antonio detective who doesn't appreciate her inserting herself in his investigations. So their relationship is frequently contentious, often humorous and always dicey.

By book four, *River City Dead*, the new book in the Aggie Mundeen mystery series, these two have survived crime, calamity and confusion, but they realize they love each other and should attempt to reset their relationship in some idyllic place away from crime. They choose to rendezvous at a San Antonio River Walk hotel during Fiesta week. With Aggie involved, nothing goes as planned. I attempted to convey this in the first two pages of *River City Dead*:

Not every city has a river running through it. And not many women plan a rendezvous at a San Antonio River Walk hotel during Fiesta Week after years of self-imposed celibacy. I was about to make history.

Sam and I were meeting at Casa Prima Hotel. Hopefully our first days and nights together in River City would be more fiesta than fiasco. And we could avoid dealing with crime.

To calm the jumping beans in my stomach, I decided to make a quick detour to Barnes and Noble and headed toward Loop 410. If SAPD called Sam away, I'd need something to read. He assured me they wouldn't contact him, but sometimes they had to rely on an experienced homicide detective for a difficult case.

Barnes and Noble was packed. After a lengthy search through half the store, I found aisles brimming with romance novels. I didn't relish being caught scouring this area. In my *Flash-News* column, "Stay Young with Aggie," I answered readers' questions about everything from fitness to relationships. As an "expert," I wasn't supposed to need help.

It wasn't as though I was innocent. I became painfully experienced after Lester the Louse seduced me when I was barely eighteen, impregnated me and vanished like mist. But stories of other people's romances might be enlightening.

Slipping down an unoccupied aisle, I reached for a title that caught my eye, *A Well-Spent Night*. A bare-chested, muscled Scottish hunk wearing a plaid kilt bulged from the cover. I squinted at the title, which upon closer inspection actually read, *A Well-Spent Knight*. Worked either way. I flipped pages to the middle, found what I was looking for and started reading. There was a lot of heavy breathing and rippling biceps, but it never said why the guy wore a kilt or how he got it off. I'd wondered about that. Historical romance might not be the thing.

Another cover caught my eye with the title *The Long Hard Ride*. A shirtless muscle-bound cowboy stood spread-legged front and center while a steer romped around behind him. I snatched the book off the shelf.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a young sales girl eyeing me. Was my face flushed?

"Can I help you?" About twenty-five with swinging hair and a pouty mouth, she looked sexy, bored, and all-knowing.

I whipped the novel under the arm laden with my shoulder purse. "Imagine that. You even have westerns. So many choices." I doused her with the superior expression I learned working at a bank. "I doubt if any of these books are really that good."

She smirked.

Some urge compelled me to jabber. “I don’t think he could ride a steer dressed like that.”

The new-fangled phone jangled in my purse. Digging to retrieve it, I dropped the books. The sales girl swiveled over and scooped them up. “I’ll keep these at the counter while you search for more.” She cocked a corner of her sulky mouth and sashayed away. I fumbled to flip open my Motorola StarTrac.

“Where are you?” It was Sam, using his professional detective voice.

“I just needed a few things. Have you seen the...our room?”

“You need to get down here, Aggie. We have problems. I’ll meet you in the lobby.” He hung up.

I wanted to show their present situation and convey enough of their past history so readers would understand why Aggie is eager but nervous about their rendezvous. Since her stories are sprinkled with humor, I wanted to set the tone and reveal her mindset and personality right up front. When Detective Sam calls her, his words and the tenor of his voice indicate that, once again, things probably won’t go as planned. Readers hopefully experience both worry and delight that a mystery will ensue, and that Aggie and Sam will be in the middle of it.

I had to be careful not to lose the momentum of Aggie meeting Sam and discovering their problem. As she drives to the hotel, I describe San Antonio’s decorations for Fiesta Week and dribble in snippets about the history of the city’s annual party—three short paragraphs.

Then, just as she glimpses the hotel, I insert a short paragraph about the significance of their imminent rendezvous:

The towering Casa Prima Hotel loomed in the next block, re-activating my jumping beans. What did Sam’s call mean? Had he discovered a crime, considered the burden of my pesky interference and decided to jettison our rendezvous?

My first inclination was to have Aggie show up at the hotel with Sam already there, dealing with a crime that had been committed. But it would have been hard to show Aggie’s mindset and depict humor in the midst of a crime scene investigation. So I had her stop at Barnes and Noble first. Such fun.

She arrives at the hotel, and the mystery is off and running. Sam is on the case, and Aggie is devastated because she knew the victim. No place for humor here. It’s sprinkled in later as Aggie meets new friends at the hotel—the Fabulous Femmes— joins their dance performance at Arneson River Theatre, and goes to Fiesta events with Sam. In between festivities, she doggedly pursues clues to the murder.

Murder, humor and romance are a balancing act, but intertwining them makes writing these stories deliciously fun. I just have to make sure to introduce these elements up front. In the first two pages.

Thanks to B.K. Stevens from Aggie, Detective Sam, and Nancy for letting us explain ourselves. We plan more adventures.

You can buy *River City Dead* here:



<http://tinyurl.com/RiverCityDead>



When Nancy was seven, she and her mother wrote poems to each other. The poetry was awful, but Nancy learned if you wrote something, people stopped to read it.

In high school, *Library Journal's Pegasus* published her poem. At eighteen, with journalists underpaid and English grads selling lingerie, Nancy slogged through General Business at UT-Austin and earned a BBA. Fortunately, one of her few electives was Creative Writing.

After graduation, she read books on writing, wrote articles, poetry, the biography of artist Jose Vives-Atsara, and founded Book Publishers of Texas.

Returning to college to study English literature, she wrote *Nine Days to Evil*, a novel of psychological suspense, and the Book Shelf column for *San Antonio Woman Magazine*. NPR broadcast her poem, "Time to Lie".

Aggie Mundeen, a character from *Nine Days to Evil*, captivated Nancy and led her to create award-winning Aggie Mundeen mysteries. She is working on Aggie's next escapade, convinced that writing is a lot more fun accounting. www.nancygwest.com
