

The First Two Pages by J. Marshall Gordon, author of “Katelyn’s Killer”

If you’ve ever written a story, you know how easily the first few paragraphs kind of write themselves. You wake up one morning, toss down your juice, slug a mug of coffee, and cannot wait to commit your fully formed story to the page. Perhaps you crack your knuckles as the computer comes to life, take a deep breath, and find your story rippling through your fingers onto the keys.

The opening of my debut mystery novel, “Katelyn’s Killer”, is an example:

There was, of course, the heady optimism of a new beginning, my debut as a gardener in Stephanie’s townhouse garden. But what I remember most clearly is my newest friend’s body dripping swamp water, her surprised eyes wide open as the EMTs lifted her from the pond.

Wait, you’re probably saying, you’ve heard it’s not really as easy as that.

I’ll have to admit that it *wasn’t* nearly that simple.

As an author of murder mysteries, my purpose is to lie through my teeth, pretending I’ve experienced the story firsthand, and hoping my reader will enjoy meeting my characters and be hooked by the first page or two. The purpose, of course, is to entice the reader into turning pages like crazy to learn how the characters resolve the devilish situation I’ve put them in. With any skill, I’ll lull my reader into thinking my main character is a real person telling her story, like a memoir: “You might not believe this, but, all kidding aside, it really happened...”

So, as you’ve probably guessed, my description above of how easily a story ripples onto the page is a total fabrication. I lied through my teeth.

Okay, now suspend your disbelief in what I’m saying for a moment. Trust me. Any storyteller who tries to tell you his story was a breeze to write, or her first paragraph appeared to her in a dream, is a con artist. After her thirtieth book, *maybe* her story flows freely through her fingertips. I wouldn’t know.

What *must* happen in the first few paragraphs is that the reader has to grasp the essence of what’s going on and whether she’s in Kansas or on the moon circa 2745.

From my first two sentences, *italicized above*, you sense that the narrator is telling you a story, that is, the story’s in first person point-of-view. And that the narrator, in a garden, remembers her dead friend being lifted out of a pond.

Check out what comes next. Is your curiosity piqued, or are you still wondering what the

dickens is happening?

It was a sunny Thursday in May. I'd been enveloped in floral perfumes and a cloud of sun-splotched backlit red leaves. No desk, no office. This was how life was meant to be.

Steph and I had become friends last fall at a Master Gardeners class that I'd signed up for on a whim. I soon realized that she knew more about horticulture than most of our instructors. At the second class when I confided to her that I wanted to find a way to jump off the hamster wheel of my public relations job and, as a kid, liked to help my mom in our garden, she suggested doing it professionally. Which led, a half year later, to the first paying gig for Summers Breeze Gardening.

For six decades, Stephanie had nurtured her prize-winning garden on Queen Anne Street in the historic center of Annapolis. But since arthritis had ended her ladder-climbing, she'd hired me to prune out some branches that were chafing the elegant boughs of her garden's centerpiece, a majestic burgundy-leaved Japanese maple. I was four rungs up my new stepladder extending my lopper's jaws to the first victim when she called.

"Penelope, can you come down for a second? My neighbor wants to meet you." I performed the surgery and, as the severed branch caromed to the ground, I smiled privately at my already growing reputation.

To give you an idea of how my story came to be started this way, let's just say that when I began writing I thought that before my narrator, Penelope, even arrived at Stephanie's townhouse garden, before she began to prune the Japanese maple, you'd want to know where she lived and how a pair of seagulls seemed to beckon her across the bridge from her house in Eastport to Stephanie's in the colonial part of Annapolis. Unh-unh! No!

In my very first story workshop, my beginner's folly was explained, gently but firmly: everything that happens before the story actually starts is called *backstory*. Backstory information, if it's even necessary, is to be spoon fed to the reader a little at a time *after* the story starts. It took more than one critique group and workshop for most of the garbage I'd written to be peeled away so the story could begin on the first page, when Penny meets Steph's neighbor and is invited to find the problem in his garden pond.

Here's how the story continues, mingling events of the morning with backstory:

Steph's tall neighbor, on his side of an old wrought iron fence between the two gardens, reminded me of a Blue Heron standing in the shallows. Aside from his aristocratic New England

accent, he reminded me of my late and lamented Grandpa Jack.

Expecting that Lionel Fielding would become the second client for my fledgling gardening enterprise, I gave him a shiny new business card and assured him that the pleasure of our meeting was all mine.

“Miss Summers,” he began, in his delightful accent, “I should very much like your help with a little problem over here.”

I loved his eloquence, but right away I had a funny feeling. Little problems, I’ve found, can always be depended on to escalate. I doubted if my new avocation was ready for one that would undoubtedly expand to a plus size. And when the “little problem” turned out to be in his goldfish pond, I refused.

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Fielding. I don’t do pond work.”

“Most landscapers,” he muttered, “work with garden ponds.” His elegant gray hair, button-down collar, and rep tie marked him as a wealthy retiree. Or he could have been a senior tutor at our Great Books college, St. John’s. You had to have money to live in this part of Annapolis.

I couldn’t see much of his pond. But what I did see looked worse than the most dismal day-old Navy coffee I’d ever tasted. Unless I was hallucinating, what he had was an unkempt miserable collage of decayed leaves and twigs in an ugly brown soup. If there were critters in that swamp, they’d have needed sonar to find their way because they sure as sugar couldn’t see a thing. Whatever talents Lionel Fielding had, they didn’t include pond-keeping.

“I’m sorry to report...,” I said with all the affected sweetness I could muster, tipping up my well-worn USS Enterprise ball-cap aw shucks fashion so he wouldn’t miss my new-client sparkle, “...that I’m an exception.”

“It’s just that our little fellow has been spouting for years.” He gestured to a small frog fountain that dribbled at the edge of the pond. “Till this morning.”

I shook my head. “Sorry.” Then to Stephanie, “We could call the guy who taught the Master Gardeners pond class.”

Lionel glanced from the ailing frog back to me. “I can certainly appreciate that ponds aren’t a specialty of yours—” he wore the hint of a smirk “—but it wouldn’t seem that finding the problem would require a degree in hydraulic engineering.”

Smartass, I thought to myself. The minor matter of a frog fountain on the sick list seemed to

be a major inconvenience. He was probably the type who needed help changing a light bulb.

*In spite of my six years in the Navy, water and I don't get along. Swimming pools were bad enough, but a pond that refused to let you see into it? That hid slithery things? I couldn't go there. When I was ten, my little brother Josh drowned in a swimming pool. It was my fault. I was engrossed in *The Secret Garden* when I was supposed to be watching him. I'll never get over my guilt, not only for his death but for driving my mother away. Ever since, just the thought of a lake or pond gives me the shivers.*

At the Naval Academy, we had to swim, but for me, each time, it took every ounce of determination I could muster. Fortunately, my aircraft carrier was never torpedoed so I never had to do the abandon ship thing for real.

"Lionel, look." I tried to hide my annoyance. "I'm not a pond gal. Planting, pruning, and maintenance are what I do." I didn't add that I had no intention of ever adding pond work to my repertoire.

Here I was, more than twenty years since Josh drowned and I still haven't outgrown the fear that a kraken would rise up and drag me under. I know it's not rational. Give me a break. At least I'd outgrown my fear of monsters under the bed. Maybe I should try electroshock therapy. I'd just started my first day as a professional gardener and, instead of growing, my reputation was already in a basket on the highway to Hades. What was unnerving was that Lionel did remind me of my Grandpa Jack, for whom I'd have done anything. I knew I should just find the damn pump and clean off whatever glop was blocking its intake. No big deal, right?

"Okay," I grumped, took a deep breath and dredged up what little moxie I could. "I'll try to find your pump."

"It's bound to be something simple," Steph said as we went through her gate into the cobblestone alley and around into Lionel's yard. "Two shakes of a lamb's tail and you'll have it fixed." Unfortunately, I couldn't share her optimism.

Up close, the pond was even more derelict. Last fall's leaves and winter's crop of downed branches were like the fifth grade joke about Beethoven in his grave: decomposing. Seeing into the slough was impossible, so I knelt at the edge and willed my hand below the surface. Like Nancy Drew in stories I'd read more than twenty years ago, I was in a very damp cellar without a flashlight. I pushed aside rotting branches, braved unseen slimy critters and swept through decayed leaves. Nothing.

Were you impatient with the backstory I worked in? Or did you not even notice that I'd dropped in bits about Penny's background, Lionel, her late lamented Grandpa Jack, and her little brother who drowned decades ago? The idea, of course, was to allow you to get acquainted with Penny as a person. Was there enough information for you to understand what's happening? Not enough?

If you like action and adventure, you might have preferred the story to start with what comes next:

I shifted to my left and reached deeper, defying invisible jaws. More of nothing.

I shifted back to the right and reached even deeper. My dread gauge soared from amber to bright red as I swung my arm in a wider arc. More leaves—a submerged branch—then—what?

I yanked my arm out and scattered soggy rotten leaves in every direction. Like the day my little brother drowned, my heart leaped. Definitely not in a good way.

"Something in your pond," I stammered.

But from deep in my English major brain came the very real possibility that someone had travelled to what Hamlet described as the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.

"Somebody," I whispered.

What's *your* preference for how a story should begin?

---- J. Marshall Gordon www.PennySummersMysteries.com



J. Marshall Gordon lives in Asheville, N.C. with his wife, a dog and three cats who take turns hanging out behind his iMac. He attended St. John's College in Annapolis, earned a B.A. in English at Franklin and Marshall College, and enjoyed a short stint as a copyboy at the Washington Post. He served as a Navy air intelligence and public affairs officer and travelled world-wide as an award-winning educational and documentary film producer. After years designing landscapes and garden ponds, he began writing Penny Summers mysteries.

Early Praise for *Katelyn's Killer*

"*Katelyn's Killer* is a fast read with a likeable protagonist named Penny Summers. Set in Annapolis, Maryland, the former Naval officer becomes entangled in a murder investigation

when she finds the body of a friend in a goldfish pond. Gordon's prose is smooth and clever, and he gives enough plot twists to keep armchair Sherlocks guessing. The Eastern Shore of Maryland is beautifully rendered, and the reader is given a vivid sense of the modern day U.S. Navy. This land-lubber learned a lot, and enjoyed it."

----- Sallie Bissell, Author of the Mary Crow thrillers.

"John Gordon's debut mystery novel, *Katelyn's Killer*, provides an appealing portrait of (mostly) tranquil life in the shadow of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis Maryland and an engaging pair of sleuths to solve the murder that disrupts that tranquility, as he depicts the tragedy of war's unintended consequences, the mendacity of contemporary politics, and the rewards of dogged determination — a first-rate mystery."

----- Con Lehane, *Murder at the 42nd Street Library*

"Penny Summers, ex-Navy turned gardener-for-hire is a charming but conflicted amateur sleuth, goaded by her own burden of guilt and supported by helpful whispers from her late grandfather. Cozy readers will enjoy the rich Maryland settings and the cast of quirky characters, as well as the moral dilemma and surprising resolution of this multi-faceted story."

----- Vicki Lane, author of the Elizabeth Goodweather Appalachian Mysteries

"Choosing a mystery from a bevy of debut authors can cause trepidation. Let me assure you there is nothing to fear in choosing John Gordon's *Katelyn's Killer*. From the opening chapter to the final sentence, Gordon takes us on a fresh, invigorating ride with a clever plot, entertaining sleuth, and a knowledge of Annapolis, Maryland, only someone with Gordon's background can display. Buy this book, find the nearest comfy couch, and have no fear."

----- David Schulman, *The Past Is Never Dead*

"Fans of Annapolis and traditional mysteries will love the intriguing debut in the Penny Summers Mystery series. This beautifully written story will touch your heart and grip your senses."

----- Larissa Reinhart, author of the Cherry Tucker Mystery series.

