

THE FIRST TWO PAGES OF RUINED STONES

By Eric Reed

Ruined Stones (Poisoned Pen Press, July 2017) is our second Grace Baxter mystery. While this novel is set during December 1941 in Newcastle on Tyne, England, Grace was introduced last year in *The Guardian Stones*. At the time she still lived in her home village of Noddweir in Shropshire but now she is a member of the Women's Auxiliary Police Force and has relocated to the city to work in a small police station headquartered in a former shop on the corner of a terraced street.

We write in a lean fashion, so the opening chapter of *Ruined Stones* occupies less than two pages. Even so it introduces two characters. The thoughts of the first reveal something of her history and hopes as Christmas nears. We also provide indications of social attitudes and physical conditions in the city, concluding with the cliff-hanging arrival of the second character.

Our theory is the key to providing a fair amount of needed information in such a short chapter is accomplished by conveying as much as possible in an unobtrusive fashion, while also laying out intriguing hints to hopefully hook the reader's interest.

At the start of the *First Two Pages*, the reader meets a young woman who is to play an unexpected part in the plot.

The young woman waited beside the ruins in the freezing December night.

While she waited she smoked. To someone watching from a short distance, she would have presented a barely perceptible thickening in the unbroken darkness of the blackout. Anyone in the street—and there were few about at this late hour—would have seen nothing more than the red blinking demon eye at the end of her cigarette.

These two paragraphs introduce an unnamed woman and in passing show the novel takes place during the wartime blackout. It is also obvious something fishy is afoot, given the weather is freezing and yet here she is outside, waiting for someone beside some ruins. A bombed-out building perhaps, in which case why isn't she sheltering from the wind what remains of it? Is this meeting so important she stays outside so as not to run the risk of missing the other party?

During the day Benwell's Roman temple was not impressive. The remains of the walls were less than knee-high. Two carved altars sat at one end. That was all. Tonight, though she couldn't see the ruins, the idea she was standing where the ancients had worshiped strange gods chilled the woman more than the biting wind off the River Tyne.

This answers the question about the ruins, which play an important part as the novel unspools. Rather than recently destroyed, the scanty ruins are a couple of thousand years old and, by the way, exist to this day. The name of the river is also the first indication of the city in which the mystery takes place.

Why, she couldn't say. It wasn't as if she hadn't loitered here before. The place was a customary place of business for professional women. Located in a green space between houses,

it offered privacy, everyone knew where it was, and a copper couldn't very well move you along if you were only admiring a local landmark.

At this point the reader learns the young woman is a prostitute. Is she waiting for a client? It seems more than likely, given all the circumstances.

Which, truth to tell, suited both working girls and over-worked coppers.

This offhand comment demonstrates her attitude to both her profession and the law, while revealing in passing the important point that the police were over-worked during the war. As indeed they were. Younger men had joined the armed forces so retirees and auxiliary policewomen such as Grace Baxter were brought in to make up depleted police department numbers.

Where was he?

Now the second character is about to appear on the scene, someone the young woman knows given they are meeting by appointment but who is equally mysterious to the reader at this point.

She checked her watch. The dial glimmered ghost-like in the smothering darkness.

The man's late arrival gives her time to think, with regret, about past Christmases. In this way some of her past history is revealed.

It would be Christmas before long. Her mam had always taken her to church on Christmas Eve. What would she say if she saw her daughter now, waiting at a pagan temple for...?

These sad musings also reveal something of her family. Alert readers will notice she thinks of her mother as mam, pointing to the northern England location of the city.

But she couldn't know. Her daughter had left home long before and never gone back.

Maybe next Christmas, if things worked out. Maybe she'd be able to return as a respectable woman, as her mam would put it.

Here more of her history is revealed as well as the rigid social expectations of the time when being respectable was considered all important, and a daughter in her profession brought shame on the entire family. To a certain extent this view continues today, of course.

She could almost smell the turkey, taste the mince pies, see the Christmas pudding. She wouldn't resist eating Brussels sprouts. Not that there'd be much of the traditional meal if rationing was still in effect.

Here, within the girl's sad thoughts of past times, we slipped in another reference to wartime conditions. It's also a nod to the traditional joke that the only reason Brussels sprouts are traditionally served with the Christmas dinner is because the Brussels Sprouts Marketing Board excels at promoting the vegetable in question.

Could you even find Christmas crackers these days? The family was always startled by the bangs when they pulled them, even though they knew what was coming. Her dad had always balked at putting on the paper hat from his cracker. Finally he'd agree and pull it down to his ears, looking silly. All for the amusement of the kids, as they realized when they were older.

When she left she hadn't guessed she'd ever miss such ordinary things. She'd been wrong, especially when Christmas brought back memories.

This pair of paragraphs mention another traditional part of the British Christmas and again underline her longing to return home and the sort of ordinary family occasions and events we remember long after childhood.

A footstep crunched on frozen grass behind her.

The approach of this unknown person closes the chapter.

As we mentioned at the beginning our writing is lean. In addition to providing a fair bit of information for the reader, we posed a number of questions for the reader. Who is this person just arriving? Is it the man the young woman awaits or somebody else? And if it's not the expected party, who is it and what are they doing visiting almost obliterated ruins during the blackout on a frigid December night? Our hope is by the end of the First Two Pages we've created enough interest in the characters and the setting to persuade the reader to continue on to Chapter Two.

About the authors:

Eric Reed is the not-so-secret pen name of Mary Reed and Eric Mayer, adopted to distinguish their new WW2 mysteries from their long-running John, Lord Chamberlain Byzantine mystery series, the eleventh entry in which, *Murder In Megara*, appeared in 2015. They have been writing together since 1992 and also co-author short stories. The most recent, *Time's Revenge*, was published in March 2017 in *Bound By Mystery*, a collection of over thirty stories by Poisoned Pen Press authors celebrating the publishers' 20th anniversary. Mary and Eric's website is at <http://home.earthlink.net/~maywrite/>

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@marymaywrite

Website

<http://home.earthlink.net/~maywrite/>

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