

Going Against the Grain

Nupur Tustin

(The First Two Pages is devoting August to a celebration of Day of the Dark, a mystery anthology edited by Kaye George and published by Wildside Press. I hope you enjoy getting a look at the opening pages of some of the twenty-four stories in this anthology about the coming total solar eclipse!)

As a writer, I take very seriously Horace's advice to begin a story in media res. If this is important advice for a novelist, it's even more important for a short story writer. So the first version of my young Haydn story, "The Baker's Boy," naturally began with the inciting event. Haydn, a young man, is getting dressed at dawn in his attic in Vienna when a commotion draws him to the window:

Heedless of his own safety, the young man leaned far out the small window. What calamity could have befallen the world today? The solar eclipse, plunging Vienna into a brief period of darkness, had come and gone without event.

My pen curiously enough refused to budge after I wrote that paragraph. I forced myself to write but with a niggling sense that something was going horribly wrong. And it had nothing to do with my choice of words.

I had two problems. First, this was supposed to be an eclipse-centered story but the story opens the day after the event. Although I had a paragraph referencing the fact that the Prussians under Frederick the Great had not overrun Vienna and overthrown the Habsburg-Lorraine dynasty, the baker's murder and the arrest of his apprentice, so far, had nothing to do with the eclipse or the fears it must have engendered.

My second problem was that Haydn had no clear reason to investigate the murder. That the young boy arrested reminded him of his youngest brother Johann seemed a rather flimsy reason for an impoverished young man with innumerable responsibilities to get involved.

To solve both problems, I had to do the unthinkable: start the story a day and a scene earlier.

"When day turns to night, the world will be turned upside down." The crone's throaty cackle penetrated Haydn's consciousness as he walked through St. Michael's Square to his quarters in the Michaelerhaus.

On the day of the eclipse, Haydn has received news that he himself has been eclipsed by his middle brother. Michael has just obtained a lucrative position while Haydn has received yet another rejection. Will his dreams of becoming a composer ever come true?

He glanced up from the letter he was reading. The precise hour at which the sun would be overshadowed, plunging all of Vienna into darkness, had yet to arrive. But his own world had already been overturned.

Naturally, he's especially vulnerable to the crone's promise that the pieces of the Lord's Shroud she's selling will avert disaster. If his situation fails to improve, he might actually have to comply with his parents' wishes to join the Church.

Although the practice of relics had probably mostly ceased in the aftermath of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, I thought it not implausible that it might still have continued, especially in a country as fervently religious as Catholic Austria. That relics would be sold to ward off any evils the eclipse might bring also seemed plausible.

Haydn stands in line behind the baker's boy, Hans. When Hans receives his piece of the linen, he's told that a dark cloud hangs over his head, but that the shroud will dispel it. Then, it's Haydn's turn. "The wheel is turning; he who is down, must go up," the crone tells him.

Haydn certainly hopes it will.

Now consider Haydn's feelings when he finds out the next day that the baker has been murdered and Hans, the baker's boy, is being arrested for the crime, his blood-besmirched apron telling the tale of the awful deed.

Hans, despite his protestations to the contrary, is led away by police guards, sure to hang for the crime. The first part of the crone's prophecy has come true. Will the second part come true as well?

With the context the first scene provides us, we can better understand Haydn's consternation at this unfortunate turn of events:

Haydn clutched the shroud tightly in his fist. He had not thought much of the old crone's words, but now they rang unpleasantly in his ears.

Haydn doesn't believe Hans, a simple lad no older than his own youngest brother, Johann, has committed the murder. The evidence suggests otherwise—the blood on Hans's apron and his presence near the body—but his protestations of innocence ring true:

"They will lead the poor lad to the gallows," he muttered to himself as Hans still protested his innocence. "Master Bettler was like a father to me. I would never hurt him."

And Haydn can't help but feel uneasy:

What protection had the shroud afforded Hans, if it had not prevented him from killing his master? And, if he had not done the deed, why had it not saved him from the gallows?

Now Haydn has a much stronger reason to attempt to prove Hans innocent. His own fate is bound up with that of the lad's:

If the shroud had no power to save Hans, it would be powerless to reverse his own fortunes. His fingers tightened around the bit of cloth. *No, no, surely, that was not possible?*

The context that the first scene provides makes for a much richer story. It enables the reader to understand Haydn's state of mind and his reason for getting involved in a matter that doesn't really concern him. It provides a connection between the victim and the sleuth. None of this would have been possible if I hadn't moved the story back.

Although it's important to start as close to the inciting incident as possible—and you can really grab your readers' attention by commencing with the murder—it's also important to set up the story. When you fail to do so, you find yourself having to retreat from the story to provide the reader with that dreaded thing: backstory.

The writer sub-consciously realizes the information must be provided for the reader to understand the story and the character's motivations, but it seems, at the same time, unnecessary; a way of halting the story at its most important point only to go back in time.

It's imperative that a story continue to move forward. The best way of achieving this is to start when you need to rather than at the point when the bodies begin to drop.

To celebrate the inclusion of this story in *Day of the Dark*, I'm also giving away another Haydn short story, "A Whiff of Murder." This one has the same characters as *A Minor Deception*, the first novel-length chronicle of Haydn's adventures. To read it, please visit:

<http://ntustin.com/tasteofmurder>



A former journalist, Nupur Tustin relies upon a Ph.D. in Communication and an M.A. in English to orchestrate fictional mayhem. The Joseph Haydn Mystery series are the result of her lifelong passion for classical music and its history. *A Minor Deception* is the first in the series.

Tustin's short stories have been published in *Mystery Weekly* and *Heater Magazine*. A 200-word story, "Voices," was a finalist in the prestigious Golden Donut contest organized by the Writers' Police Academy in 2015.

Look out for "The Evidence Never Lies" and "Mrs. Sutton's Project," both set in contemporary California, on [Amazon](#).

Links

Web site: <http://ntustin.com>

Short Story: <http://ntustin.com/tasteofmurder>

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Nupur-Tustin/e/B01M59UPOX>

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