

Unmasking the Monster: The First Two Pages of “The Devil’s Standtable”

By Melissa H. Blaine

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

Writing urban fantasy can sometimes be a bit like creating a Scooby-Doo episode in reverse. In the iconic cartoon, Scooby and the gang travel somewhere and encounter a ghost or monster or other supernatural creature. They spend the rest of the episode getting chased by the creature, gathering clues, and eating Scooby snacks. At the end, Scooby and the rest unmask the creature as human and explain the mystery.

In urban fantasy, which takes the contemporary world and infuses it with the supernatural, the characters who are supernatural often need to be unmasked early to set the stage. In my short story, “The Devil’s Standtable,” which appears in *Day of the Dark*, edited by Kaye George, I needed to establish the setting for the story quickly. This brought a challenge. I needed to set the story up as happening in the contemporary world, in this case, August 21, 2017, when the total solar eclipse was taking place. But I also needed to let the reader know that this contemporary world wasn’t quite the normal one we see around us. And, since this was a short story, it all had to happen quickly so the story didn’t get bogged down in the setting description.

The first paragraph starts normally enough:

I took one look at the busy parking lot for the Devil’s Standtable trailhead and began to mentally calculate the odds that I would be staked, screamed at, or offered as a sacrifice to the disappearing sun. The screaming started before I even had the car in park, which left me hoping that the staking and sacrificing would wait until after the solar eclipse.

I love words like “staked” because they work as shorthand. Who gets staked? Vampires. Where do vampires exist? A fantasy story of some sort. One small word, but it carries a cultural meaning that most of us instantly recognize.

Things get a little weirder in the second paragraph, putting us more firmly into fantasy setting:

My chances of death started with my partner, and I use that term loosely. Walter Lockwood was busy stuffing cupcakes iced with red frosting and tiny sprinkles into his ghostly white face. The frosting had stained Walter’s fangs, making him look like he’d drained some poor soul in a back alley. The fangs, of course, were fake and underneath the makeup his face was a shade lighter than mine. The disguise was convincing though. The man in the car next to us screamed and drove away in a squeal of tires, and when a nearby mother spotted Walter, she

gave a small squeak and gathered her three children under her arms like a mother hen, herding them away from us. Why Walter, a decent wizard in his own right, chose to disguise himself as a vampire was a bit of a mystery, although I suspected that Walter was just insecure. The supernatural and human psyches aren't always so different.

Here, the character of Walter shows up. Although he likes to disguise himself as a Nosterfu-type vampire, he's really a wizard. The reaction of the people, however, mean that they recognize what a vampire is and fear it. That means that vampires also exist in this version of the world, even if Walter isn't one. With the existence of two supernatural beings, we've tipped into a contemporary fantasy setting.

The lot teemed with cars and people, most of whom had been keeping a close eye on the sky until we arrived. I wiped a trickle of sweat from my forehead, gathered my unruly black hair in a makeshift bun, and did my own assessment of the sun through my solar eclipse glasses. My eyes narrowed when I realized the moon was already sneaking over the edge of the sun. I'd been waiting for August 21, 2017 for what seemed like ages. The date circled on the calendar like some women mark their wedding dates. As an astronomy buff, this was on my bucket list to see. I just hadn't planned on working while it happened.

We were already a half hour late for a mysterious meeting with Agent Oto, who'd called yesterday to ask us for a rendezvous. On our way, Walter had insisted we stop at a bakery in Carbondale for his daily ration of cupcakes. From there, we had headed south on 51, wound our way over to Makanda, and drove straight into the heart of Giant City State Park.

Walter was oblivious to all the commotion, as usual. "Come on, Pops."

My goal with these three paragraphs is to blend that supernatural back into the contemporary world. The reader learns more about the location that the characters are in (south of Carbondale, IL, in Giant City State Park). Walter is eating cupcakes from a bakery. The narrator has a pair of eclipse glasses and weddings are still happening. All recognizable parts of our world to blend with the supernatural elements earlier.

Before I get to the end of the first 500 or so words, I wanted to do two more things: name the narrator and make it clear what she is on the supernatural who's who chart.

I sighed inwardly at his use of my despised nickname. I'd asked him at least a thousand times to call me Poppy, but it never seemed to sink in. My first badge had even sported "Pops Inca" when I'd received it, thanks to Walter's haphazard completion of my paperwork. As the token human in the Department of Prophecies (DOP), the first in close to a hundred years, I had a tiny amount of pull.

Setting up the world in an urban fantasy short story can be a challenge. Those worlds are often big and complex. Short stories are, well, short. The hope is always to bring in enough of the contemporary world and enough of the supernatural and then whirl it up with some interesting characters and a hook for the story. Unmasking the “monsters” early can help give the reader that important sense of place and time.

I hope that if you found the first two pages of my story, “The Devil’s Standtable,” interesting that you’ll check out *Day of the Dark*, and the 23 other authors and stories in the anthology. Thank you to B.K. Stevens for hosting me on your blog!



Melissa H. Blaine lives in Michigan with her often-hellish hound. She began writing urban/contemporary fantasy when supernatural creatures kept popping up in her mysteries. “The Devil’s Standtable” was Melissa’s first fiction publication. She is a member of Sisters in Crime, The Short Mystery Fiction Society, and the Grand Rapids Region Writers Group. When she’s not writing, Melissa enjoys photographing cemeteries, hiking, and snowshoeing. You can learn more about Melissa and her writing at www.melissahblaine.com, www.facebook.com/MelissaHBlaineAuthor, and www.twitter.com/melissahblaine.

Day of the Dark: Stories of Eclipse can be purchased at [Wildside Press](#) and [Amazon](#).