

**First Two Pages of “Levitas” in
*Where Crime Never Sleeps: Murder New York Style 4***

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In September and October, The First Two Pages features posts by some of the authors who contributed stories to Where Crime Never Sleeps: Murder New York Style 4 (Level Best Books, September 2017), the fourth anthology of crime and mystery short stories by members of the New York/ Tri-State Chapter of Sisters in Crime.

A whiff of sex and scandal; a glimpse of the artsy, Bohemian life of a bygone era; an example of the mysterious powers of the mind. All this I hoped to provide in the first two pages of my short story.

The challenge was to write a mystery story involving a landmarked site in New York City. I knew, as soon as I stepped inside The National Arts Club, whose tarnished beauty and regal bearing are unmistakable symbols of a former age, what the ending of my story would be. I knew, as I seated myself at the memorial service for an old friend, in a gallery featuring an exhibition of nude paintings, where the middle of my story would play out. But how to begin?

How to create a bridge from a contemporary situation, and a motive for a crime, to the past history of a New York City landmark? How to avoid a mind-numbing account of historical facts and create a living monument to the arts—an institution that would itself become a character in the story? And how to create a human protagonist to interact with a marble and limestone building in a way to give equal billing to both?

The solution was to create a protagonist with a scandalous past and a shocking future. I am fascinated by the power of the mind to conjure up and project its own reality, how an intense imagination can transform an immaterial psychological state into a material, physical presence, and so I decided that my protagonist and the crime itself would have a surrealist element.

I wanted to introduce this surrealist dimension as soon as possible in order to seduce the reader to suspend disbelief. Here is the reader’s first glimpse of my protagonist:

Anabell was standing in her bathroom, half asleep, staring at her toothbrush, when it slowly lifted itself from the glass on the sink. It hovered a couple of inches in the air, quivered a little, and then dropped into her hand.

To help the reader accept this element, I planted my protagonist securely in the realistic life of New York City, give her a recognizable New York City problem to solve, and put her in a real New York City neighborhood.

She needed all the positive energy she could muster to look for a new apartment. It made her sick just to think of it. To lose her home. Her sanctuary. She had lived most of her life in a

brownstone on the Upper West Side. Her husband had died there, and she had expected to as well. And then the owner informed her that he had sold it and she had to move.

Yes, Anabell is elderly and physically weak, but she has a secret strength.

Levitation was a sweet surprise, but she had been practicing yoga for fifty years, and her ex-yoga teacher Helen had told her levitation was common....Helen of Troy, Irwin had called her. Helen Destroy was more like it.

The reader's first glimpse of a dramatic past is the allusion to Helen of Troy, evoking the ancient beauty who caused such havoc and bloodshed. But now I needed to propel her forward.

And then she saw a boxed notice in the New York Times obituary section.

Patricia Rothman, 76. Painter. Survived by her husband, celebrated artist Irwin Rothman. Memorial service: The National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South. Wed. 2 P.M. Proper attire required.

Patricia. Her arch rival. Dead at last! Patricia had left Irwin years ago and moved away. Irwin probably still lived at The Club.

The notice in the newspaper gives Annabel an idea, a motive for future action, and it gives the reader another glimpse into her past.

It made her smile when she read the words, "Proper attire required." That stuffy old Victorian dress code was still in place. Women had to wear dresses or skirts. No pants. Men had to wear jackets in all the public rooms.

What were they thinking, she wondered, beckoning modernity with one hand and holding it back with the other? On the modern side, it was the first arts club that made women full members. To protect them, it offered a home away from home—subsidized rental apartment/studios—where they could live and work in a safe environment. Of course, what actually went on in those studios was not exactly what the founding fathers had in mind. The painting she had posed for, *Nude on a Park Bench*, almost caused a riot when it was first displayed outside in Gramercy Park. And what went on inside had nothing to do with safety. She could still feel Irwin's arms and legs around her own, smell the sweet scent of perfume mixed with the sweat of feverish lovemaking.

Sex and scandal in the past, and now a motive for a crime that will take place in the future:

Maybe she could leave the Upper West Side after all. Once upon a time she had called The National Arts Club home. The apartment at The National Arts Club had once been hers, and she would find a way to get it back.

Anabell becomes the bridge linking the action of her past, the glory of her salad days as an artist and model, with her practical needs in contemporary life. The outdated dress code, still in effect at the Club, bolsters this link between past and present.

As fiction writers, we all face the challenge of naming our characters. I chose the name Anabell, first and foremost, simply because it did not belong to anyone I knew. I was still smarting from complaints of family members who accused me of transforming them into disreputable characters in my novel merely because I had used the first letter of their names! Secondly, I was looking for a name that was ethnically neutral, because my character was to belong only to the clan of Bacchus and that gang of hedonists whose art set them free of traditional restraints. I thought of “Anabell” as a place holder, while I wrote the rest of my story, knowing that with the flick of a key on my computer I could replace her with a different name when I had more time to think about it.

However, I found myself quite satisfied with “Anabell” and really didn’t give her name another thought until this blog required a closer analysis. Looking backward, I found many associations that seemed to bubble up from my unconscious: Edgar Allan Poe's Annabel Lee, Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Isabel Archer in Henry James's *Portrait of A Lady*, the Italian *bella* for beautiful.

The real “magic” in creating a short story occurs somewhere in the space between the mind of the writer and the written word. For the writer as well as the reader, fiction can be a very satisfying journey of discovery.



Roslyn Siegel, PhD has held senior editorial positions at Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, Consumer Reports, the Literary Guild Book Club, and MJF Books, where she is currently Director of Acquisitions. Her articles and book reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *The Village Voice*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, and other periodicals. She is the author of *Goodie One Shoes* and *Well-Heeled*, part of the Emily Place Mystery Series, set on the colorful Upper West Side of Manhattan and featuring spirited amateur detective Emily Levine, proprietor of the fashionista’s favorite discount shoe store, where there are always shoes to die for.