

The First Two Pages: *Dark Network: An Imogen Trager Novel*

By James McCrone (Faithless Elector)

Authors write to be read. As I revise my stories, I conjure a reader browsing the shelves in a bookstore or scrolling online, picking or clicking this or that book. This conjured reader may or may not have a specific objective in mind. S/he wants a story, and if the story isn't gripping in some way—if the narrative voice, or the situation or characters are not compelling right away, if they're not drawn to turn the page—that potential reader puts down the book and moves on. The tale and characters authors create are real and compelling to us. To lose a potential reader to indifference because we've failed to communicate the urgency we feel represents a supreme failure.

The beginning of *Dark Network*, the second book in the Imogen Trager series, presented particular difficulties. While it continues the story begun in *Faithless Elector*, it's meant to work also as a stand-alone. This was an individual choice on my part—I hate reading for pleasure where there's homework involved! So to write an effective opening for it, I would have to grab first-time readers but not turn off those who had followed our feisty heroine from the first book.

There needed to be a situation and moment that felt right for readers of *Faithless Elector*, one that would also immediately draw a new reader in. Both readers needed to understand where they were, and to have questions about why. And, with a thriller, they need to glimpse the stakes and potential scope of the story.

The date is the first clue for readers of *Faithless*. *Dark Network* is picking up three days after the ending of the first book. While a first-time reader won't necessarily tumble to the significance, it also works to set up the compressed time in which the story will operate. Like the first book, there is extreme time pressure to resolve and prosecute the conspiracy before it can establish its goals, after which it will be nearly impossible to dislodge.

Dark Network opens with an interrogation:

December 22—Washington, DC

It was daytime. She knew that much. Pale light filtered in from the high arrow-slit windows on the wall behind her, scattered and reflected about the room by the two-way mirror on the wall facing her, a cold yellow light in a cold yellow room. Agent Imogen Trager sat quietly at a metal table facing her interrogator.

Readers of the first book will be stunned that Imogen is being interrogated. She's the heroine. Readers coming to it brand new will wonder why an FBI Agent is being interrogated. Readers of both stripes are tied quickly to Imogen's point of view, establishing that it's her story. The setting is impersonal, coldly

institutional, contrasted with glimpses from her point of view. Her patience is fraying.

Though she tried to appear alert and sharp, she was tired. Tired of the questions, the repetition, the obvious way they tried to get her to implicate herself or betray herself through contradiction. What had she known, when had she known it; what did she do with the information, whom had she told? Her fears about Duncan Calder and Doug Pollack threatened to undermine her brave exterior.

“Well, what does Pollack say?” she had asked in exasperation.

“At the moment, Agent Trager, Assistant Director Pollack is in a medically induced coma. We may never hear from him. I need to hear it from you.”

Imogen wondered if it was true, wondered if Doug was being subjected to the same kind of interrogation as she was.

The FBI is interrogating its own agent, and that agent senses that her superiors might be lying to her. Readers will wonder why there’s such a lack of trust within the FBI? Worse, there is even the implied possibility that they’re trying to pin something on her.

This is also a moment to catch *Faithless* readers up and let them know that whatever comes next, Imogen is utterly alone...if Brody, the interrogator, can be believed.

“You say you suspected Agent Kurtz. When did you begin to suspect him? What were your clues?” Agent Neil Brody flipped to a new page on his yellow pad and sat back.

Imogen had grown to hate Brody in the short time they had spent together. Sporting fashionable lace-up shoes, a well-tailored, expensive midnight blue suit, he asked questions not like an investigator following information, but like an HR manager entering responses into printed boxes. He sat urbanely at an angle to the

table, legs crossed, hands folded in his lap. Occasionally, he would reach languidly for the pen and jot something down, the notepad at arm's length.

This moment conveys Imogen's forceful presence, despite her fatigue, despite her isolation. She's alone, tangled in a dangerous web of deception and double-speak, but she's neither intimidated nor submissive. Brody is clearly not of her caliber. She regards him coldly, dismissively, as more "like an HR manger." She may be holding her fire (metaphorically), but she's angry, irritated and impatient. There is a difference between her careful responses and her inner pique.

"As I believe I said before," Imogen began with elaborate patience, "we did not suspect Kurtz at all—until he started shooting at us."

This moment does triple duty: a) it's meant to be funny, revealing something of Imogen's sardonic nature, b) it raises the stakes, and c) it provides some information as to why the FBI is interrogating its own.

The exchange below provides further information regarding how we may have arrived in this cell with no one trusting each other, and pushes the plot forward as it reveals the extent to which the Bureau has been compromised. It also establishes from the beginning what will be a key point throughout—who *can* Imogen trust?

“And why do you think that was?”

“He was terminating the only people who really knew what was going on—me, Calder and Pollack.”

“I mean, why didn’t you suspect him? You say the whole department was dirty.”

“I believe I said that I worried about who to trust. The operation to turn the Electors was operating at a national level, my phone at the Bureau had been bugged.”

“Yes, but why trust him? Was your judgment impaired by your past relationship with Kurtz?”

Imogen sighed as she thought, “So, we’re on to that now.” It had taken long enough.

Here, the reader learns more about the circumstances of Imogen’s interrogation—and that there is a nationwide conspiracy, but how it’s happening and what is going on remain questions in the mind of the reader.

The scene ends with Imogen as indomitable as ever. Yes, she sighs with weary defiance, she has had an affair with a Bureau colleague, who turned out to be a conspirator. What’s your point?

The scene and location shift to the Midwest, and Springfield, Illinois. A large group of protesters has gathered outside the Governor’s office there:

Springfield, Illinois

In the broad hallway in front of the Governor’s office inside the Capitol building, the US Attorney, the Illinois Governor and the Illinois Attorney General were trying to hold a joint press conference. Their responses to questions—and the questions themselves—were difficult to hear, because as each spoke, a crowd of protesters, convinced the election results in the state had been sabotaged, booed and jeered from the far end.

“At our behest,” the Governor began amid shouts of derision and whistling, “and working with our own Illinois Attorney General’s office, the Public Integrity office at the Justice Department has thoroughly reviewed the results. And after extensive . . .” As the jeering grew louder, he repeated, “after extensive review and re-review. . .”

A chorus of booing from the crowd gathered in the hallway and along the stairs gave way to chants of “Fix! Fix! Fix!” The governor, no stranger to potent politics, nevertheless blinked into the cameras. He exchanged an amazed look with his Attorney General, who looked at the US Attorney.

Shifting the action so early is a cue to the scope of the novel. Imogen and Brody were talking about Electors as though the immediate problem were in the past, but here we are with very real protestors agitating for a full investigation of the election. It’s pretty clear that whatever happened to put Imogen in that interrogation room is not over.

By the end of the first two pages, the protagonist/heroine is fixed in our minds. She’s a sardonic, feisty FBI Agent, who, it seems, will have to operate alone. Not only will she have to contend with a continuing conspiracy, but she’ll have to fight against her own colleagues to do it. A nationwide conspiracy is still operating, but what is it, and what does it want to accomplish?

Readers will need to turn the page to find out what happens next.

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James McCrone is the author of the Imogen Trager series—*Faithless Elector*, *Dark Network*, and the forthcoming *Who Governs*—“taut” and “gripping” political thrillers about a stolen presidency. Although not based on

events now gripping the world, the Imogen Trager series resonates with them. He's a member of the The Mystery Writers of America, International Association of Crime writers, and is an honorary "Mister" in the Sisters in Crime network. James has an MFA from the University of Washington. You can learn more at <http://jamesmccrone.com/>.