

## **The First Two Pages: “The Night They Burned Ms. Dixie’s Place”**

By Debra H. Goldstein

From *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* (May/June 2017)

Newspaper articles address the five “w’s” - who, what, where, when and why - in pyramid form because the bottom paragraphs of a story may be lopped off. Mystery writers incorporate the five “w’s” with red herrings and twists throughout a story to keep readers invested until the piece’s conclusion. The first paragraphs of “The Night They Burned Ms. Dixie’s Place” open-endedly establish four of the five “w’s.”

I remember the night they burned Ms. Dixie’s place. The newspapers reported it was an incendiary, but the only hot thing that night was Ms. Dixie.

Folks who aren’t from around these parts chalk it up to being another story from the Civil Rights era. Not as moving as those four little girls killed in the church that got bombed over on Sixteenth Street or as scary as when they blew out the walls of Reverend Shuttlesworth’s house. There weren’t any men in hoods slinking around that night, and Bull Connor and those dogs the Yankees saw on TV were all sleeping in their respective beds.

What started everything was her belief that she was entitled to run her business the way she wanted. There aren’t too many left in the world who heard her that night.

In this opening, I deliberately mix Southern storytelling and editorialized news reporting to provide basic information while setting the tone of the story.

- Who: Ms. Dixie. The reader doesn't know who is speaking, but knows the narrator was impressed by Ms. Dixie's looks and presence.
- What: Burning of Ms. Dixie's place
- Where: Her place/Birmingham, Alabama (where all events mentioned occurred)
- When: Civil Rights era (1960's)
- Why: The implication is something significant interfered with how Ms. Dixie intended to run her business, but the reader understands while some may think the event had racist overtones, it wasn't tied to the horrific characters and events taking place in Birmingham during the Civil Rights era.

After creating the mood of the story, my goal in the next few paragraphs is to build tension, better introduce Ms. Dixie and her business, and create a rapport between the reader, Ms. Dixie and the narrator. I accomplish this by pitting the child's voice and actions of the narrator against the words and actions of an adult, Ms. Dixie. With each paragraph, I add details to subconsciously give the reader access and understanding of the characters while moving the plot of the story forward.

For me, it was the first time I met Dixie Davis. She gave me a nickel. I was nine years old and always looking for a way to make a penny or a nickel. As an extra job, my mom cleaned rooms at one of

Ms. Dixie's places at night. Ms. Dixie insisted, unlike that motel on First Avenue, that beds be changed anytime a room got a new customer. Most nights, my mom left me with my grandmother, but when Nana couldn't watch me, Mom would take me along and tell me to sit quietly in the kitchen until she was done working.

I was lying in the corner, on the linoleum floor, trying to catch a bit of any summer breeze that might come through the screen door, when Dixie came into the kitchen. From where I lay, I had to crane my neck up to see where a red, yellow, and green bandana that matched her muumuu dress covered a shade of pink hair that I'd never seen on a woman before. She had her back to me as she ran water in the sink and washed her hands. Then, she grabbed a glass from the drainboard and filled it with water from the tap before sitting down at the wood kitchen table. She took a long sip, put her glass down on the table, glanced at the clock on the wall across from her, and rested her head on her hands.

I didn't think she'd notice me cuz I was laying on the floor behind her, so I jumped a mile when she said: "What you staring at, boy?" When I didn't reply, she turned and fixed her eyes on me. I jumped to my feet, but I still didn't say anything. "Cat got your tongue, boy?"

"No, ma'am. Just don't have nothin' to say."

She laughed. "That's not a bad way to be. Wish more men knew how to keep their mouths shut when they don't have anything to say."

From these paragraphs, the reader learns the child is a scrapper, observer and devoted son. He constantly looks for ways to make a few cents to help his single mother, who works two jobs. His extended care network includes his grandmother, but she isn't always available to watch him. In those instances, rather than leave him home alone, his mother drags him with her to work, but sternly warns him not to misbehave. The reader also discovers Ms. Dixie is very different than the boy's

mother. She is flamboyant, colorful, sees everything and runs a business where the sheets get changed more than once a night.

Whether it is a red herring or a true plot point, the growth of the story is deliberately built on the five “w’s” foundation created for the reader in these introductory paragraphs. From this point forward, each paragraph is designed to layer the story to its final peak, keeping in mind the initial who, what, where, when and why references. These intentionally crafted nuances are what make the final twist in “The Night They Burned Ms. Dixie’s Place” credible.

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Judge Debra H. Goldstein is the author of the upcoming Sarah Blair series (Kensington), *Should Have Played Poker* and *Maze in Blue*. In addition to “The Night They Burned Ms. Dixie’s Place” (*Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, May/June 2017), her recent short stories include “Day After Thanksgiving Soup” (*Mystery Weekly* – November 2017) and “A Golden Eclipse” (*Day of the Dark*, July 2017). Find out more at [www.debrahgoldstein.com](http://www.debrahgoldstein.com) and at her blog, [www.debrahgoldstein.com/blog](http://www.debrahgoldstein.com/blog).