

The First Two Pages: *Murder in G Major*

By Alexia Gordon

Gethsemane Brown leaned closer to the windshield. She could just make out a thatched cottage through the gray curtain of rain pounding southwestern Ireland's coast.

The opening lines of my debut mystery, *Murder in G Major*, were some of the most difficult I've written. I'd read so many articles and heard so many lectures about "killer first sentences" and dramatic openings that grabbed the reader and didn't let them go until the final climax. A high bar to reach.

My dilemma? I wasn't writing a body-on-the-first page, grisly, gritty modern mystery. I envisioned *Murder in G Major* as a slow-burn cozy with a debt to English village mysteries more than a blazing inferno of contemporary crime. How could I keep readers turning pages without bleeding all over them?

Murder in G Major began life in the Writer's Path creative writing program at Southern Methodist University. I asked one of my instructors, Daniel J. Hale, for advice. He said, "Put danger on the first page." I thought about danger's definition—"the possibility of suffering harm or injury." Danger didn't mean a murder had to occur on the first page. It meant I had to create the sense that something terrible might happen to my main character at any minute.

She rested her head against the window's cool glass, trying to ignore the sound of tires skidding on the wet gravel, and reconsidered her any-job-is-better-than-no-job philosophy. Right now unemployment sounded appealing.

I faced the added challenge of introducing a new character to the world, introducing a fictional village, and crafting a plausible explanation for why an African American classical musician was stuck in a small Irish village with no easy way out. I needed to include enough backstory to orient readers but not so much that the opening turned into an info dump. Several revisions resulted in a lot—a lot—of cutting. I settled on revealing hints of backstory through thoughts and conversations with another character. I decided to use a treacherous car ride as a vehicle (pun intended) because our conversations in the car are often minimal, especially if the driver is concentrating on navigating hazardous conditions, and our thoughts often race.

The whitewashed house perched a few hundred yards from an ominous cliff. Farther up the road, a lighthouse stood sentry over the rocky landscape.

Since I had to describe my novel's locale with some detail—Dunmullach doesn't exist so readers can't Google pictures or visit the village's Facebook page—had to spend time setting up my premise, and couldn't rely on dead bodies to heighten the tension in my opening pages, I used place to telegraph the message

that bad things were going to happen. I love stories where place is as much a character as people. I'm a fan of authors like Edgar Allan Poe and M.R. James who mastered the art of atmosphere. We'd used "The Fall of the House of Usher" as an example in a class on setting so Poe was definitely on my mind when I wrote my first two pages.

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A writer since childhood, Alexia Gordon put literary endeavors on hold to finish medical school and Family Medicine residency training. Medical career established, she returned to writing fiction. She completed SMU's Writer's Path program in Dallas, Texas. Henry Press published her first novel, *Murder in G Major*, book one of the Gethsemane Brown mysteries, which won the Lefty Award for Best Debut Novel, was nominated for an Agatha Award for Best New Novel, and was selected one of Suspense Magazine's Best Debuts. Two books have followed in the series: *Death in D Minor* and *Killing in C Sharp*, just released in March 2018.

Alexia listens to classical music, drinks whiskey, and blogs at both www.missdemeanors.com, voted one of Writers' Digest magazine's 101 best websites for writers, and http://femmesfatales.typepad.com/my_weblog/.

