

The First Two Pages: “The End of the World”

By Susan Breen

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I started my writing career as a reporter. So I never write an opening paragraph that I don't hear my first editor's gravelly voice in my head: *Susan, you have one chance to grab a reader's attention!* Usually I picture that imaginary reader as a sensible and friendly person. But when I wrote my story “The End of the World,” I had a very specific reader in mind—the editors of the *Malice Domestic: Murder Most Geographical* Anthology. I knew they were looking for stories with a geographical theme, and I wanted to hook them.

Leaving aside the months I spent trying to figure out which specific geographical area the story would be set in (Britain? South Africa? Tahiti!), I figured there had to be some details about geography in the opening paragraph. However, there had to be some significant plot point as well. Something ominous, that would signal this was a mystery story, as well as a travel story. So this is what I wrote:

Toward the close of her father's trial for murder, Cosima Bell happened to see an advertisement for Tahiti. The colors transfixed her. Violet skies and aquamarine lagoons and flaming orange sunsets. Sometimes Cosima saw colors in her mind when she played the piano, but never like these. She decided in that moment that when the trial

was over and her father condemned—because there was never any doubt about the verdict—she would go to Tahiti and disappear.

This opening paragraph is doing a lot of work for me. It establishes that Cosima's father is on trial for murder. What happened? It hints at the sort of person she is. She plays the piano. She has synesthesia, which is the ability to see colors when you hear sounds. I don't specifically say what the father did (because I want to tease the reader into the story), but it's clear that whatever her father has done, it's terrible, because he is definitely going to jail. It establishes what Cosima wants, which is to get away. The tone is dark. And, it brings in the fact that this story will be set in Tahiti.

I jammed so much into that opening paragraph that I felt I could breathe a little bit for the next few paragraphs. I didn't want the reader to feel like I was hitting her over the head with a sledgehammer. So I made the next few paragraphs softer and less dense. This would give the reader time, I hoped, to absorb all the information I'd packed into that first paragraph and think about it a bit and be curious.

Then, toward the top of the second page, I began doing the important work of establishing who Cosima is. Understanding her character is vital to believing the twists and turns of the story. In fact, the story only makes sense if you understand the sort of people Cosima and her father are, and so I had to establish that early. He

is one of the greatest musicians of his generation. She is 24 years old and has been raised to be his assistant. She's been insulated from the world. Her needs don't matter at all. She is dominated by him, until one day, when he is off on one of his evening rambles, he's pulled aside by a police officer because one of his tail lights is out, and the police officer notices a finger sticking out of the trunk. Now Cosima's whole well-ordered life is falling apart. She has to get away.

Having established all that, it was time, at the bottom of page 2, for Cosima to arrive in Tahiti. I put in some specific anchoring details about how she got there, because Tahiti is so far away (from me) and exotic, that I felt it important to have a transitioning moment. You don't just wake up in Tahiti. You have to get there. So this is the paragraph at the end of the second page:

To get to Tahiti, Cosima had to fly from New York to Los Angeles and then on to the Papeete International Airport. From there she took a high-speed ferry across the Sea of the Moon and at the dock, she was met by the hotel driver.

Now, finally, at the end of the second page, I've got Cosima where I want her, and I've set up all the details, so that now I can let the mystery unfold. I can assure you that her vacation is eventful.

Susan Breen is the author of the Maggie Dove mystery series, published by Alibi/Random House. Her short stories have been published by *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Best Nonrequired Reading*, and many other places. She has never been to Tahiti but would like to go. You can find out more about Susan at www.susanjbreen.com.