

## **The First Two Pages: “Book of Hours”**

By Robert Mangeot

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It was perfect. In my original draft of “Book of Hours,” the opening paragraph cut immediately to our hero in extreme close-up of an illuminated manuscript, as photographed for art history. The illustration was a knight on bended knee a-courting this rather sneaky-looking damsel. I mean, we were nose-to-page with the damsel grinning and medieval lettering and ivy borders. Catchy voice. Vivid description. Immersive scene. A nod to theme, backstory, and MacGuffin. It was perfect. Absolutely perfect, until every living soul who critiqued that opening told me, “I don’t get it.”

“Who’s narrating?” they asked. “Why are they examining the manuscript?”

Who’s speaking? Ed, our hero. Wasn’t it obvious, how perfect the thing was? In his signature voice? As for whats and whys, our Ed the art thief was bounty-hunted down after swiping that manuscript (“Aix to Grind,” *AHMM* September 2014), as happens with art thieves. Not by the cops. By the art-obsessed owner Marchesa Ruggieri demanding her treasure of treasures back or else, as happens with obsessed art owners. She and her goon were rubbing Ed’s face in what he’d done, literally.

Mind you, not enough of these grounding details were actually in that first opening. The details came later as events unfolded. No, I wrote just a guy describing a damsel and ivy at zoom level.

Really, and this took hair-pulling and forehead-banging to shake loose, my friends were saying I hadn't framed the story.

There are as many great ways to open a story as there are writers, but there is one sure-fire approach: set the damn thing up. Take that first paragraph to call the card game and collect the character antes. Then deal. Look no further than Flannery O'Connor or Poe to see this done by the masters.

Well, if it worked for them, right? So I fired up the computer and dropped in what eventually became this first paragraph:

No self-respecting pro would let his doom get this impending. Last year I'd been wandering the Marchesa Ruggieri's Lombard estate, not hurting anybody, rummaging among her valuables. In her drawing room I'd come across a rare medieval manuscript. An illuminated book of hours, to us in one form or another of the manuscript business, a devotional meant for moments of inner reflection. Her particular devotional had fetched a not-too-shabby price even after the gentleman's discount. Problem was, tonight found me back in the Marchesa's drawing room and doubled over a high-res photo of her manuscript, the Marchesa asking me if I remembered her lost treasure. Yep, tonight I had ample reason—if not much time—for a little professional perspective.

The Marchesa nodded, and the Corsican slab of goon stopped pinning me and thudded a meaty elbow to my ribs.

I never said she was asking nicely.

Not O'Connor, but job done. Instead of a guy staring at a disconnected MacGuffin, that first paragraph shows Ed's personality. He gives us the scene and his stakes. He brings in even a smidge of foreshadowing. Grounded? Here's hoping.

Reading back after a couple years, two things click with me. One, that opening sentence: "No self-respecting pro would let his doom get this impending."

In ten words, Ed tells us what his story is about. Doom. Inferred mistakes. Wounded pride. These are his big outer and inner questions for the next four thousand words. Say you screwed up. Say someone is unhelpfully pointing out said screw-up. Say now you feel doomed. Been there? Hand raised. Would you embrace that doom or double down on pride?

Which leads to the second click, what registers most. It's in the rewrite's last sentence of paragraph one. That last word: "Perspective."

How I've come to think about stories, every word does its duty (or double or triple-duty) moving events and reader toward that big, honking end. In a traditional structure, some words have a special position and thus can have special purpose. That last beat at the get-go paragraph can be the most special of all. It's where a story can speak its theme or its heart, and that note can echo and echo until we hit The End.

Ed, for example. He's getting Corsican rib work, and the Marchesa is taller and darker than ever, and he's taking this night of impending doom for some final perspective. And what is Ed's life perspective? In paragraph one, he describes his work as "wandering the Marchesa Ruggieri's Lombard estate, not hurting anybody." And his fencing hot art as "the gentleman's discount." Finally, what he stole as "An illuminated book of hours, to us in one form or another of the manuscript business, a devotional meant for moments of inner reflection."

You know, Ed thinks he's in another form of the manuscript biz, as if the illegal side just needs a better publicist. That's his inner reflection and pierced self-image in this rewritten and rib-tenderizing start. Pride and perspective. Rubbing this guy's nose in that made Try Two a clearer and better open.

It's not perfect. It frames things okay, though. Best of all, not a single critique rubbed my own nose in this again.

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Robert Mangeot lives in Franklin, Tennessee with his wife and cats. His short fiction appears here and there, including *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Mystery Weekly Magazine*, the MWA anthology *Ice Cold*, and the Anthony-winning *Murder Under the Oaks*. His work was a 2017 Derringer Award finalist. He proudly serves as current chapter president for Sisters in Crime Middle Tennessee. When not writing, he can be found wandering the snack food aisles of America or France. He posts stuff about all this at [www.robertmangeot.com](http://www.robertmangeot.com).