

The First Two Pages: “50”

By Josh Pachter

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My first published work of fiction—“E.Q. Griffen Earns His Name,” written when I was sixteen—appeared in the December 1968 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. About two years ago, I realized that the golden anniversary of that first publication was approaching, and I decided to celebrate by bringing its protagonist back, half a century older, in an anniversary story.

The first question I had to consider was: “Where would E.Q. Griffen be at the age of sixty-six, and what would he be doing?” That was an easy one, since my daughter Rebecca and I snuck an Easter-egg answer into our collaborative story, “History on the Bedroom Wall,” which appeared in *EQMM's* “Department of First Stories” in 2009—making me, by the way, the only person who has ever appeared in that section of the magazine *twice*, first in 1968 and again forty-one years later! “History on the Bedroom Wall” is told in the first person by a student at Middlebury College in Vermont, and at one point the narrator mentions an English teacher named Professor Griffen, who Becca and I knew was my E.Q. Griffen, all grown up.

So it seemed logical to open my anniversary story with Professor Ellery Queen Griffen sitting in his faculty office at Midd, preparing for an upcoming lecture.

All I needed now was a crime for him to solve. Because the character is an *homage* to the original Ellery Queen, I quickly gravitated toward a dying-message murder, since the “dying message” is perhaps the best known of Ellery Queen the author's plot devices. *It's autumn*, I decided, *halfway through the fall semester*, which allowed me to mention the changing colors outside the professor's office window, and the phrase “from green to gold to gone” seemed appropriately alliterative and poetic for an English teacher. *So he's working on a poetry lecture*, I figured, and my mind jumped straight to Robert Frost. “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” was the obvious choice—but maybe it was *too* obvious, so I settled on “Fire and Ice,” which I've always thought was a better poem, anyway. As I sat at my desk, thinking my way into the story, the Shuffle Songs feature on my computer's music program began to play James Taylor's “Fire and Rain.” Does iTunes ever miraculously track your thoughts? It does mine, sometimes, and this was one of them—so iTunes mind meld went into the mix.

The next question I had to answer was how to confront the grown-up Ellery with a murder mystery, and the answer came in a flash: why not let him think back to an unsolved crime from fifty years ago, when he was a teenager and his father

was a police inspector who delighted in bringing cases home from the office for his eleven children—each named after a famous fictional detective—to wrestle with?

One of the fascinating things about the original Ellery Queen’s work was Fred Dannay and Manny Lee’s decision to give their fictional detective the same name they’d selected as their joint pseudonym. In the universe they invented, Ellery Queen is an author who writes mysteries about a mystery writer named Ellery Queen, who writes crime fiction about an author named Ellery Queen. Wheels within wheels!

So what if I were to say in my new story that the old one, “E.Q. Griffen Earns His Name,” was written not by some kid named Josh Pachter but by some kid named E.Q. Griffen! Wheels within wheels within wheels!

This way, the grownup E.Q. Griffen could reminisce about those short stories he wrote, half a century in his past, and, in his reminiscence, pull a copy of his fifty-year-old first story from his bookshelf for the first time in many years, flip it open... and find inside it a photocopy of the dying-message clue from one of his father’s old cases.

And what if—wheels within wheels within wheels within wheels!—that dying message turned out to be the numbers five and zero, “50,” in the sort of coincidence that the real world really *does* drop into our laps, every once in a while?

That was all I needed. The rest was just writing the story—which appears in the November/December 2018 issue of *EQMM*, exactly fifty years after the publication of my first story, half a century ago. (If you want to read “E.Q. Griffen Earns His Name,” it’s posted on the EQMM website, and I read it aloud as the November entry in the magazine’s monthly podcast series.)

READ THE FIRST TWO PAGES OF “50” HERE:

The leaves outside his office window had burned, almost without his notice, from green to gold to gone. There were a few stragglers, he saw now, few enough to count.

Professor Griffen found that he was counting them, realized what he was doing and forced himself to drag his gaze away from the window and back to his computer. From the Bose speakers on either side of the monitor, James Taylor sang about fire and rain, and the coincidence reminded him that he was supposed to be updating his lecture notes on Robert Frost for a generation of students—a giggle of girls, a bluster of boys—whose mental lives had devolved into such lukewarmth that he despaired of ever convincing them that fire and ice were momentous enough to momentarily divert their attention from their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds.

There were fewer words on his screen than leaves on the trees, and he felt himself no more capable of adding to the latter tally than to the former.

“Thought I’d see you, thought I’d see you, fire and rain,
now....”

James Taylor’s voice faded away, was replaced by “Fifty Years After the Fair,” and not for the first time he marveled at iTunes’ telepathic ability to follow—or lead?—his thoughts.

How, he wondered, could he possibly capture the interest of the teenagers in his freshman lit class? He’d been a teenager himself, once upon a time—but it was now 50 years after *that* fair. Half a century ago, his widowed father and four siblings had clustered around the 15-inch television in the family room to listen to Walter Cronkite tell

them about Vietnam on the evening news. Today, their screens in their pockets and 500 channels instead of three, all his students seemed to know or care about was which Kardashian was having sex with which football player or rapper....

“Fifty years after the fair,” Aimee Mann sang, “I drink from a different cup. But it does no good to compare, ‘cause nothing ever measures up.”

He turned away again, away from both monitor and window, and let his eyes slow-dance across the spines of his dearest friends, his books, the fat poetry anthologies and slender chapbooks and hopeful single-author collections.

Perhaps it was the song that steered his fingers to the line-up of old magazines on the bookcase’s bottom shelf. There were several dozen of them, long-ignored souvenirs of his youth. He slid the left-most volume free and held it in his hands, surprised to see how well the green and red and yellow cover had withstood the passing of five decades.

“9 NEW stories,” the bold red letters beneath the yellow words that named the publication proudly announced. He counted six writers’ names on the cover, and smiled to see that his own name was not one of them. Hugh Pentecost, Lawrence Treat, Agatha Christie, Berkely Mather, Celia Fremlin, George Harmon Coxe. He gingerly opened the old magazine, curious to see who the two unlisted others were, in addition to himself. John Pierce, Rhona Petrie, William Brittain, Jerome L. Johnson. Apparently two of the six on the cover were represented by reprints, not NEW stories. Agatha Christie must surely be one of them, but he had no idea which of the others.

A folded sheet of paper tucked between the pages marked the location of his contribution. He’d long since forgotten that editor Frederic Dannay—who, with his cousin Manfred B. Lee, had written those marvelous novels and short stories, beginning way back in the late 1920s—had devoted an entire page of the magazine, page 106, to an introduction. “Department of First Stories,” he read. “This is the 325th ‘first story’ to be published by *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*... another ‘first’ by a teenager (God bless ‘em!)....”

Josh Pachter has been a regular contributor to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* since 1968, and his short fiction also appears in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, and many other periodicals and anthologies. He co-edited *The Misadventures of Ellery Queen* (Wildside, 2018) and *Amsterdam Noir* (Akashic Books, 2019) and edited *The Man Who Read Mysteries: The Short Fiction of William Brittain* (Crippen & Landru, 2018). He teaches communication studies and film appreciation at Northern Virginia Community College's Loudoun Campus.